

**YELLOW
CREEK
GUN**

Lyman Lutes

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by

LYMAN LUTES

Author of "*Red River Maverick*"
and "*Horse Thief Trail*"



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ARCADIA HOUSE
419 Park Ave. South, New York 10016

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1.

The big dark 'breed sheathing a knife, leaped from the restaurant doorway onto the wooden sidewalk, bringing Tuck Wilds into the trouble, just because he chanced to be riding through Ute Ford.

Ahead, the cow town by the ice-fed mountain stream drowsed in the summer sun under cottonwood and pine. Behind it, the valley backed against dark green forests, giving way to the distant, high white peaks of the Colorado Rockies.

Only the 'breed crossing the clattering boardwalk seemed hurried. Vaulting onto a pony at the hitch rack, he reined away and spurred from Wilds down the single street, past saloons and stores and cabin residences.

A girl appeared in the same restaurant doorway. Clad in cowboy garb, a striking beauty, dusky with Indian blood, flashing black eyes and two long braids of hair, she cried, "He's nearly killed my sister! Get Doc Kincaid!"

Tuck Wilds waited to ask no questions, but wheeled, spurred back toward the little office with its residence rooms in back by the saloon nicknamed the Butcher Shop.

Stepping to earth by the M.D. shingle as the dun slid up. Tuck ground-tied, swiftly stepped onto the boardwalk, across it, and into the open door of the doctor's waiting room.

The doctor, a short little man, straightened up beyond a second door where he was bending over an open-mouthed cowboy in a chair. "Well, sit," he grunted.

"Doc," Tuck said, "some girl says her sister's been knifed at the hotel restaurant."

Dr. Kincaid, turning and picking his black bag from a side table, informed his dental patient: "Your tooth 'll remain a while. We can't afford to lose any women. Too few now."

The cowboy in the chair closed his swollen jaw, nodding agreement.

"Take my dun," Tuck said, on the doctor's heels as the small man hit the board sidewalk.

"No, thanks. I don't like strange broncs." The doctor went hurrying down the street toward the hotel restaurant. "I'll need your help maybe," he flung over a shoulder.

"Coming," Tuck said, following.

Big, brawny, elderly Mrs. Kelly, who owned the only hotel in Ute Ford, was on the sidewalk in front of it

when Dr. Kincaid and Tuck Wilds arrived; she was ordering several silent men to gather, to get a posse riding. Not pausing in her talk, she said, "Inside, quick, Doc. It's Mrs. Wolf. Her sister, Jennie, from Elk River's with her." The big woman looked at Wilds hard. "You can ride with the posse after this no-account husband, Jed Wolf."

Dr. Kincaid, never stopping, stepped on through the restaurant doorway. "This cowboy's helping me, Ma."

The woman stilled.

Somewhat reluctantly, Tuck followed the small doctor. The medical man strode through the empty restaurant and turned through a door leading into the hotel proper. The way was easy to follow. It was a bloody trail. "Doc," the M.D. called ahead, not hesitating in the hallway.

From a room to which the blood trail led, the girl Jennie, who had sent Tuck after help, said, "Here, Doc. Fout."

As Tuck followed the doctor, he saw Jennie rise from beside her bloody, unconscious sister, a slender, gingham-clad form, now face downward on an iron bedstead.

The doctor ordered, "Cowboy, help me turn the lady over."

At first Tuck thought Mrs. Wolf was dead, with her throat cut and a slashed arm; she was limp.

"Jennie," the doctor ordered again, "fetch hot water." Jennie hurried outside the room.

"Hold the lady's head up," said Dr. Kincaid. The face was dusky, like Jennie's, only older, traced with worry wrinkles. The doctor began tying off bleeding blood vessels immediately. By the time Jennie returned with hot water, the doctor finished his line of stitches at the victim's throat.

"How is Sis?" asked Jennie, setting the steaming teakettle and a basin on the bed stand. Wordlessly, Mrs. Kelly came into the room and stacked an armful of white linen on the bureau.

"Suffering from shock and loss of blood," the doctor said laconically. "Luckily, she put her arm up to shield the throat from a cut deep enough to endanger her life. The arm's cut to the bone. But soon I'll have her bandaged and resting—"

Outside in the street, several guns fired sporadically, and half a dozen or more horses, spurred hard, raced away.

Mrs. Kelly said, satisfied, "They'll get Jed Wolf."

"I hope," said Jennie. "Sis ran away from Jed up in Wyoming because he was always beating her up when in one of his moods. He must have hidden out near the ranch and followed me here today to find her."

"Don't think of it, Jennie," consoled Mrs. Kelly. "He could have found her working here himself. Anyway, it was you grabbed up that skillet of hot grease, threw it on him and ran him out."

"If I'd had my gun—" Jennie said darkly.

"Dr. Kincaid," Tuck broke in, "I'll join that posse leaving, seeing I'm not needed here."

"That's it, cowboy," said Mrs. Kelly, standing aside in the doorway.

Jennie thrust out a tanned, supple hand, and, flushing, Tuck took it. "*Gracias*," the girl said.

Still embarrassed, Tuck passed Mrs. Kelly, went along the hallway into the hotel lobby and outside. The posse was already out of sight, but he hurried along to his dun and began to trail out of town, following the riders.

The tracks of the massed horsemen had pretty well wiped out those of Jed Wolf's pony. It was obvious they were spurting on his trail. Tuck's dun was tired, and he really had no business following on a tired mount. He might have turned back, but hardly an hour out of Ute Ford, he pulled up, surprised. The pursued man's horse tracks were superimposed on those of the posse.

The story was plain. Jed Wolf had doubled back, watched his pursuers continue south, and then crossed their trail, heading west for Coyote Basin, a hot badland particularly in the summer. The basin, lower than the area about, was some two days' ride across to the west, a land of rattlesnakes, coyotes and horned toads, living in a desert of cacti, greasewood, and sagebrush. Rather than a level stretch that could be easily crossed, the basin was a confusion of buttes, boulders, soft sand and deep canyons.

The only water in the basin was one spring a full day

to the west.

With a hot sun nearly straight overhead, Tuck put the dun down the steep trail into the basin, knowing if his mount lost a shoe or went lame he might never come out of the badlands alive. He thought of Jennie's black eyes, the press of her fingers thanking him, and decided to go on. He thought to himself: A fool over a girl I've seen less than an hour, a half-breed who dresses in cowboy garb and probably can shoot and rope with any range hand. But, he reflected further, a beauty—

He rode ahead, amid a glare of sand and rocks. The heat of the summer sun baked through his shirt. Heat waves shimmered before his eyes; there seemed no breath of air. Suddenly, from a weird formation of red sandstone far ahead on the trail, a rifle cracked. Sand spurted only yards ahead of him.

Even as Tuck slid off the dun and led him behind an unnatural-shaped rock, he knew the shot was only a warning.

His thoughts went back nine years, when he had come riding into Colorado with Scotty. They had played the fools with a boyish prank back in their home town; but a mayor's son had died accidentally. Tuck did not want to recall Kentucky; it had easily accessible water and trees and regular town streets and farms. For months in that long ago, Scotty and he had pretended to prospect for silver; then they had separated. Scotty joined the Utes awhile, marrying two sisters. Then he started his

"ranch" some twenty miles west of Tuck's place. Scotty ran a ferry across the river into Utah; built a saloon, a trading post, made bootleg sales to his wives' relatives—all the Ute tribesmen who came north from the reservation hunting.

It was on Scotty's advice that Tuck had come riding through Ute Ford to the county seat, Grand City. Scotty had ridden across the desert to warn him that a Denver lawyer was checking Tuck's Yellow Creek ranch, not legally homesteaded, intending to put men on it with correct government papers, the dollar twenty-five an acre paid to the land office.

"Stake your claim on the section with buildings, Tuck," Scotty warned. "Those old wanted posters out for us are past seven years old now. They're likely thrown away."

So Tuck thought as he was halted by Jed Wolf's warning shot; shortly, however, he mounted and rode on through the strange formations of red sandstone, buttes and spires and fantasies, unchallenged. Wolf was still ahead on the trail, such as it was. The sun was molten hot in the far west now; there was only heat in the basin. Canyons and gulches began cutting the pathway ahead. Among these, an added danger, lay occasional coiled rattlers, but Tuck refused to shoot, not intending to inform Wolf he was behind.

As he halted the dun, looking over the first steep wall he had to descend, he saw the quite fresh track of

Jed Wolf's pony. Then he looked down at the narrow canyon floor below, now a vacant strip of sand. Sighing, he leaned back in the saddle and nudged the cow pony. The dun let his front hooves slide over the edge of the canyon and drew his hind feet under him. frantic digs of the rear hooves alone broke the slide down. Hardly pausing in the cut, Tuck set the pony to climbing the far wall; the dun's buck jumps took them up. Tuck helping by leaning forward.

The dun, breathing heavily, was lathered with foam, and Tuck was about to nudge him down into a third intersecting canyon when he glimpsed the horse below, in the open, saddled but riderless. Tuck dismounted, looking below cautiously. The horse stood rather oddly, his legs far apart, as if not sure of his balance. A distance away, half concealed by a boulder, Tuck saw the dark cowboy who had tried to kill his wife; he was sitting, rifle on his lap. Even as Tuck knelt, staring over the side-wall, Wolf, with his left hand, swung up his rifle like a pistol and fired. The shot far wild but, Tuck realized, not intentionally wild. He darted another quick look; then he realized the man's plight.

Wolf's pony, snake-bitten, had thrown him, dislocating a right shoulder or breaking that arm. If Tuck quietly left the breed, he would die down there, for Wolf's pony could never get him out. The poor snake-bitten animal would never walk out alive.

Yet Jed Wolf was more deadly than ever. Knowing

death faced him, he would want Tuck, his pursuer, to go with him.

Tuck stood up on the wall; for the first time he unrolled his canteen and took a swallow. When the dun whinnied at the smell or gurgle of water, Tuck wet his handkerchief and squeezed a few drops of water on the neck of the pony's tongue.

Tuck and the pony rested on the wall.

Shadows began to build up as the sun dropped. Occasionally Tuck peered down, studying the dying horse and Jed Wolf. Both were in pain. But the pain of the man did not necessarily incapacitate him. Assuming his right arm or shoulder was injured, the breed would be in a fever of fear, making him real mean.

When objects became nearly indistinguishable in the darkness, Tuck tightened the dun's cinches, remounted, and nudged the animal over the canyon wall into the depths below.

A flaming spurt of rifle fire, the crash reverberating, came from below, but the bullet was wild; Tuck never heard it even strike. His pony was descending too noisily. The hind legs of the pony dug in; then, in a flurry of dust, rocks and debris, the dun struck sand on the canyon floor. The rifle of Jed Wolf flamed once again, and Tuck pulled his Colt; assuming Wolf had shot left-handed in his trouble, Tuck fired quickly in return, hoping to hit the useable left arm.

Wolf screamed. Tuck sprang from his trembling cow

pony and started sprinting forward.

"You fool!" he cried. "Kill my boss and we'll both die!"

Tuck could now make out Wolf rising from beside his boulder, and Tuck swung at him with the .45 gun barrel. He intended to "buffalo" the other, but the 'breed swerved. Tuck hit him on the right shoulder, which was cruel but unplanned. Wolf keeled over like a poled ox. Before Tuck even bothered to tie him, he turned back to check his pony. The dun was unharmed.

By the light of a match Tuck saw his shot had not even struck Wolf, but had smashed his rifle from his left hand, probably shocking him. His right shoulder, as Tuck had guessed, was dislocated, was already swollen and likely tender.

Since Wolf was out anyway, Tuck decided now was a good time to try to get the arm back in the socket. While he was not sure he could do it, he intended to try. Having seen Wolf's knifed wife, Tuck felt a little pain would not be remiss, anyway, for the breed.

Tuck stretched Wolf on his back and sat on his right side. After pulling off his own right boot, he put that heel in Wolf's armpit and pulled up the dislocated arm. When his right foot kicked, Wolf's bone head slid into the socket—and Wolf screamed.

"I'd better pull your fangs," Tuck said now. He pulled Wolf's .45, his belt knife and, after a brief further search, a derringer stuck in the waistband inside the

shirt front. Wolf's rifle was useless from Tuck's slug.

Finally Tuck tied the other's hands and feet and went over to his snake-bitten pony. The poor beast was breathing hard, lathered and trembling. Though he hated to do so, he put a bullet in the pony's brain, for the animal deserved that. Then Tuck ungreased the dead pony and his dun, sat, smoked, and went to sleep, hungry. If he ate, he figured, he might get more thirsty.

2.

They were coming up the incline out of Coyote Basin when Tuck saw the posse; and the posse saw them riding double. Now up to a nearly a dozen men, the posse closed around them. Jed stiffened, but Tuck said, "Anybody got some water to spare my dun?"

Several canteens were proffered, for now it was seen Wolf was a captive. Tuck dismounted, put all the water he dared in his hat and doled it out to his pony. When the gelding had drunk, Tuck wet his own throat, then corked the canteen, seeing Jed was sullenly being given water by a red-haired cowboy the others called Sandy.

Sandy, taking back his canteen, said succinctly, "There's a cottonwood a mile back will do for the party."

Tuck shook his head. "No; Wolf stands legal trial."

The possemen glanced at each other. Sandy said, "He's your prisoner. But we'll ride back to Ute Ford."

"I'll welcome your company," Tuck said. "This fellow's too surly to talk."

The riders continued on toward Ute Ford.

From town they saw the posse returning. At the outskirts, close to twenty men were gathered, all obviously awaiting the return of the prisoner. At the forefront of this apparent mob was a brawny, hairy-chested man wearing the leather apron of a blacksmith; he carried a rope, which he held high as the posse neared.

"Well done, boys!" the blacksmith called. "We'll take over from here."

Tuck kept his dun walking ahead. By now, Jed Wolf had been remounted on a horse behind Tuck, riding double with Sandy, whose horse was fresher.

"Nope," Tuck said, "this man gets a jury trial. I'm only turning him over to a lawman."

The blacksmith asked Sandy, "How'd he get to be your spokesman?"

Sandy said, "While the rest of us were on a wild goose chase, Wilds here got the prisoner himself in Coyote Basin."

The blacksmith grunted. "The marshal is in bed with D.J.'s, under Doc's care." Then he added belligerently: "We got no regular jail, Wilds."

"Maybe you'd come along then and put the prisoner in irons til the county sheriff can take charge of him," Tuck said easily.

"Wal, I guess I will," the blacksmith said, turning to follow Tuck as the dun passed him. "Now that I think of it, the mayor sent word by a rider to Sheriff Beck yesterday."

The county seat, Grand City, where Tuck had been riding to file a belated homestead claim on his ranch section, was sixty-five miles away. "Good." He nodded. Happening to look back to where the would-be walking lynchers were falling in behind the mounted possemen, Tuck caught Jed Wolf's black eyes on him; they were savage with hate. Wolf did not even appreciate Tuck saving him from an impromptu hanging.

Sheriff Beck, from Grand City, came in the temporary Ute Ford jail just as the blacksmith, Si Wardell, completed shackling Jed Wolf by a cot. Tired from a fast, hard ride, the sheriff was a big man, wearing boots to the thigh, two waist guns, and carrying a Winchester. His eyes speedily took in the situation in the makeshift jail.

"Hoped to beat a hangin'," Beck said, satisfied. "It keeps a sheriff travelin' fast not to find a Ute Ford prisoner already hanging from a cottonwood outside town."

The blacksmith, straightening up, nodded at Tuck. "It's Wilds you can thank, not me, Beck, for having a live one awaiting you."

Sheriff Beck asked wryly, glancing over Tuck Wilds. "You know Wolf?"

Jed Wolf mouthed obscenely about his captor's antecedents.

"Never saw him before yesterday morning," Tuck said. "But he learns to hate quick."

The sheriff's lips quirked. "Why wouldn't you let 'em hang him, considering his nature?"

"The woman's alive yet, far as I know," Tuck answered. "I think anybody deserves a trial."

"Wolf'll stand trial pronto in Grand City," Sheriff Beck agreed. "We'll start back in the morning. I'd like you to ride along."

Tuck started to demur, then remembered he had a homestead claim to file in the county seat land office. "Reckon I can," he agreed.

"Good. I'll stay with the prisoner overnight. Doc tells me the town marshal is under the weather. Doc'll be one witness, by the way. Would one of you tell the girl's sister we'd like her to ride along, too, and tell her story?"

"Jennie Myers?" The blacksmith looked at Tuck slyly. "They tell me, Wilds, you helped Doc with her sister—but I'd better tell her. She may have something to say about your not letting the boys stretch Jed Wolf's neck." He strode outside.

Tuck thought of the black-eyed, dusky beauty. He had hoped she would stay friendly.

The sheriff continued, "I see your hoss's fagged as it is, Wilds. Why not arrange a fresh one for each of us at the livery stable for tomorrow, and a third one for Wolf here?"

Tuck nodded agreement.

Beck grinned at the other's face. "Don't worry about

the girl being mad. Doc says she's impressed with you. He says her dad's got fifteen-twenty riders up on Elk River; and she won't give any of them the time of day. Of course," he added reflectively, "Doc says she can outride, out-rope, and out-shoot most of 'em, despite their being a bunch of hardcases." He laughed.

Sourly, Tuck went outside into the darkening street, down to the livery stable, where he left Sheriff Beck's horse and his, then dickered for three fresh mounts for next day. Later, he arranged with Mrs. Kelly for a room at the Ute Ford Hotel overnight.

In the dawn the small group—Sheriff Beck, the prisoner, Dr. Kincaid, Jennie Myers and Tuck—set off early for the county seat, Grand City. Jed Wolf, his feet tied to the stirrups, his hands bound to the horn, was on a horse led by Beck from his mount.

The small Dr. Kincaid rode a bronco he claimed to have broken and trained himself, to lessen his native bucking.

Jennie Myers, slightly paler than Tuck remembered her, still wore cowboy garb, but today carried a waist gun. He saw Jed Wolf look at it as they rode outside Ute Ford. Nothing this glance of Wolf, too, Jennie said, "I brought this pistol for you, brother-in-law Jed. Just you give me a chance, I'll give you a Mexican trial."

Jed Wolf howled with laughter. "Better'n hanging—or a stretch in the pen. Which will it be?"

Dr. Kincaid spoke up quickly, "No thanks to you Mrs. Wolf isn't dead. Cutting her up is no way to treat a wife."

Jed Wolf cursed.

Sheriff Beck twisted in his saddle, "Jed, you can do your talking soon enough to a jury of your peers. Don't anger these witnesses no more."

That quieted everybody. Jennie, however, pulled her bronco back and rode closer to Tuck. She stayed there the rest of the day, though she said nothing till the second afternoon. Then she asked hesitantly, "Mr. Wilds, where's your ranch?"

"On Yellow Creek," Tuck said, surprised. He noted the girl start, a line furrow her lovely forehead. "A one-man spread," Tuck added, not wanting Jennie to think him a big operator when he was not.

"I've heard it mentioned," she said, her voice sounding unhappy.

"I've been there over seven years," Tuck said. "Built it up in the parks along the creek, between desert lands. Was just starting in to homestead it legal, when I happened on this."

"I'd take papers pronto," Jennie said seriously. Tuck did not push the matter, riding silently, too, till they rode into Grand City near sunset.

There was no time for him to get to the land office after getting at the county seat; for the judge had already been sitting, the arrivals found out. Sheriff Beck

said Wolf's trial would be early next morning; quick frontier justice.

Thus, before Tuck got to the land office to file the belated homestead claim on his ranch, he found himself in the courtroom as a witness at Wolf's trial. It was not much of a court, according to Eastern standards—a one-room frame affair on which the lumber, in drying, had made cracks letting in daylight. The room was packed, however, the wooden benches seating both cowboys and townspeople.

The judge was an elderly man who wore a Prince Albert coat, a stovepipe hat, a gunbelt and cowboy boots. As he began Jed Wolf's trial, the judge made himself more comfortable in his chair by taking his pistol and placing it on the table before him. He brought order by pounding his boot heels on the table where he sat, rested his feet atop it.

Sheriff Beck sat with his prisoner across the only open space in the room, facing those designated as witnesses. Once the jury was selected, the trial moved fast. Jennie Myers told her story simply; then Dr. Kincaid, and the sheriff. Tuck was called last by the prosecuting lawyer, to whom he had talked briefly and who he thought must have forgotten him, but who had not.

After he had briefly narrated the details of the capture, the prosecutor asked him, "Now, Mr. Wilds, what did the defendant say to you that morning he was hobbling to attack you in the canyon bottom?"

"In Coyote Basin? Oh, I was in no danger. I sleep light. But he said, 'After killing a woman, I can't be in more trouble.' But of course he never killed his wife; she's—"

Tuck was looking at the prisoner, Wolf, but still was startled at the swiftness of the 'breed's leap from his chair, his sound across the open space at Tuck in the witness chair. Wolf had been handcuffed or tied up till the trial, but now his hands were free; and Tuck guessed he wanted to throttle him to silence. Wolf's hands were stretched out to do so.

Tuck was armed, but hesitated to shoot in the crowd; and the next thing he knew, Wolf was at him, knocking him down. The two of them wrestled on the courtroom floor for the gun, Wolf screaming, "I'll kill you!"

Sheriff Beck, surprised by Wolf, too, caught the prisoner from behind; but could not separate him and Tuck till helped by others.

As Wolf, cursing and struggling, was hauled back to his chair by the sheriff and his deputy, Smitty, and tied there, Tuck rose from the floor to find himself looking into Jennie Myers' eyes. "You should have shot him!" she said bitterly. "You'll never be safe, long as he lives."

The judge, who had grabbed his revolver off the table in the confusion, was pounding for order with a gavel now; quiet was restored slowly, and the trial continued. But Jed Wolf's jury never retired from the courtroom. The foreman, an old-time resident, after

exchanging whispers and glances with his fellow jury members, finally stood up, saying, "Judge, we've reached a decision."

"What is the decision?"

"Guilty—as charged."

The judge, hearing this information, began to turn pages in a book of statutes, while the spectators yelled approval of the jury. The crowd quieted only when the judge rapped his boot heels.

"The decision of this court is that Sheriff Beck deliver said defendant to the state pen—"

The spectators made so much noise again Tuck never heard the judge's sentence of fifteen years. But he realized Jennie Myers had his arm, and they stood face to face; men crowded all about the courtroom, talking noisily.

"Please," she said, "hurry down to the land office and file on your ranch section. There's not much time left today—"

"Pronto," Tuck said, wondering at her words. "Thanks for reminding me—this bedlam—"

Jennie smiled, pushing him away. "Later, we'll talk."

Tuck began working himself from the jam of the courtroom.

The man in the land office looked at him sourly. "You can't claim this section," he told Tuck. "It was filed on only this morning."

"How come?" Tuck asked, unable to believe the agent. "I've actually already lived there over seven years. I

built my ranch cabin, barn, buildings, corral there."

"Master," the agent told him, "you should have filed, then, years ago."

After learning an S.C. Chick claimed his ranch-stead as a homestead, Tuck turned bitterly and went out of the land office into the street of Grand City.

Jennie Myers, standing on the boardwalk, almost as if awaiting Tuck, saw him immediately and hurried to him. She could tell his bad luck by his face. "Too late?" she asked, biting her lower lip.

"Just a few hours. Some dirty dog figures to jump my ranch—"

"I know the man," the girl cried. "He's been riding for my dad."

Tuck started.

"Before you decide to try force, come with me to our ranch on Elk River. Maybe Dad can get the man to reuege, sell an option to you."

Tuck looked at her. "I was thinking of a lawyer first."

Jennie shook her head, her braids moving. "No use. I've—I've—I can't tell you now. But Dad surely won't let this happen to a friend of ours."

"When do you plan to return to Elk River?"

"I can't stand towns. I'm ready to start now," the girl answered, "though I wanted to go by Ute Ford and see how Sis is."

"We'll do that."

Jennie said simply. "Our horses are at the same livery

stable. We can walk there now."

"Just the two of us?" Tuck looked up at the sun, realizing they would be spending that night, the next, possibly a third on the trail alone.

Jennie paused, looking at Tuck. Her face flushed darkly. "I trust you," she said, turning.

Tuck hurried beside her; they continued on to the livery stable.

Saddling wordlessly, they rode out of the county seat.

The second night on the trail, as they hunkered about the fire after eating, Jennie said unexpectedly, "You're wondering how much I know about this claim jumping of your ranch."

Tuck looked at her over the rim of his coffee cup. "I'm not asking you to talk."

"My dad runs horses, mostly, sometimes cattle, to these new Mormon settlements in Utah. He wanted a lay-over station on Yellow Creek; you know, there is desert on both sides, the route he drives."

The girl had courage; she knew many of the herds, both of cattle and horses, these last particularly, crossing the border were rustled stock.

"S.G. Click's the man jumped on my ranch," he said.

"Pepper Click. Worked for Dad. Now you're mad at my dad?"

"Maybe, for getting this Click to file on the land I've been squatting on. But I'll talk to him."

"You've been in trouble before," said Jennie soberly.

"I'm hoping you don't come gunning."

"Not against your father," Tuck said.

Jennie looked away. "I hope this trouble works out. Truly."

On the fourth morning, Jennie dismounted at the Ute Ford Hotel tie rack to go in and see how her sister was. Waiting outside, Tuck found himself cornered by several men who wanted to hear about the trial. Briefly he gave the news. As he talked, Si Wardell, the blacksmith came up the street from his smithy. After he heard the outcome of the trial, Wardell caught Tuck's elbow and pulled him across the street and into the Otis General Store.

Otis, a paunchy, soft, elderly townsmen, came toward Wardell and Tuck at once, there being no customers.

"Mayor, this is Tuck Wilds, the man I told you about." Quickly, the blacksmith told the news of Jed Wolf that Tuck brought; then he said, "Things are getting lawless here, Wilds. A cowboy has just found the body of a wholesale house salesman who left town several days ago, driving his buggy. The salesman—the Mayor here knew him well—was robbed, shot and thrown in the Elk River. The cowboy who found his body tracked the killer from a sandbar to the Myers bunkhouse on Elk River."

"Jennie's home place?" Tuck asked.

Both men nodded. Otis added, "The bunkhouse's a couple miles up the Elk from Ah's saloon and the home [redacted]"

"Myers has long been an outlaw boss suspect," Wardell broke in. "He has a three-hundred horse herd; no one gets to see the brands—fifteen, twenty riders." Wardell lowered his voice. "The cowboy who found the body swears he saw the saleman's buggy, plain as sin, parked outside Myers' saloon, beyond the wooden bridge across the Elk!"

"I'm riding to Elk River with Miss Myers to see her dad," Tuck admitted. "Somebody's filed claim on my ranch on Yellow Creek—Pepper Creek. He used to work for Mr. Myers. She's going to try and help me—"

Wardell and Otis exchanged glances.

"You'll check that buggy?" asked Wardell breathlessly.

"If your town marshal's got the D.T.'s, get another, or tell Sheriff Beck. I'm no lawman," Tuck grunted.

"Maybe then the buggy 'll be gone," said Wardell. Unhappily turning, Tuck went out of the Otis store.

3.

Jennie Myers was out of sight as Tuck neared the narrow wooden bridge across the Elk River. On the far bank, just beyond the bridge, her horse was in the corral with another. The door of the single-room log cabin by the Meyers Saloon was open, an unpainted clapboard, up-roofed building with a narrow false front.

Trudging through the dust of the way from the saloon toward the bridge, swinging a pistol in his right hand, came a talish, well-built man, his eyes darting glances across at Tuck and the timbered hill behind. Once the walker stumbled, and only then did Tuck realize the man was drinking.

Tuck continued riding toward the bridge, though he realized the pistoleer intended to meet him there. They could pass on the bridge, a single lane, wide enough for a wagon or buggy, but such was not the advancing walker's intention, obviously. Tuck saw a buggy showing in the opening between the saloon and cabin home.

Al Myers (for Tuck was sure this was Jennie's father)

stepped on the plank flooring at the other end of the bridge as the dun's shoes rang noisily on the dry, hollow-sounding near side. Myers looked up at Tuck then, his eyes oddly blue and cold under a mane of blond hair.

"That's close enough to Myers' land," said the walking man, leveling the pistol on Tuck.

Tuck reined in the dun and sat quietly looking at Jennie's father.

The man, standing spraddle-legged, showed tobacco-stained teeth. "Now you can turn tail and ride; I want no spy from Ute Ford here."

Tuck folded his hands on the horn. "I didn't agree to any Ute Ford spying. But an honest man shouldn't mind saying where he got that buggy yonder." Tuck nodded at the back of the vehicle.

Myers grunted. "I bought that buggy, cheap," he added. "One of my riders found it and brought it in."

"Why should you object to anyone knowing that in Ute Ford?"

"I don't answer to anyone in Ute Ford, bucko."

"A cowboy found a drummer shot; whoever sold you the buggy might be the killer."

Myers growled, "So?"

Tuck shrugged. "I didn't come to argue about the buggy. I came to talk to you because Jennie said you knew S. C. Pepper Click; said he once worked for you."

"I know Pepper," admitted Myers.

"Maybe she told you he jumped a ranch section where

I've been for years; filed on it, despite my building it up."

"Can he be blamed," asked Myers shrewdly, "'cause you'd never filed legal homestead papers?'"

"You know the unwritten law here," Tuck said.

Myers' lips quirked. "It'll be hard to run Click off. Two others quit with him—his brother Levi and Pete Cravens. Said they planned to run a way station on Yellow Creek 'twixt Utah and here; offered to do business with me on drives."

"There's other land on Yellow Creek."

"A Denver lawyer told us your ranch was unfiled land."

"Us?" Tuck asked bitterly. "You won't help me, then?"

"I'd not likely help a Ute Ford spy."

Hidden till now by the far riverbank cottonwoods, willows, and brush upstream, two riders, coming down from the north, seeing the two men on the bridge, angled their mounts toward it. Tuck switched his glance to the spurring two. By the wolfish grins interchanged, he knew the two would push this meeting between Myers and him onto a shooting; and he did not want to draw on Jennie's father.

From the cabin doorway, where Tuck guessed she had been watching her father and him, Jennie stepped outside, swinging a rifle in her right hand; she began running fast to come between the approaching riders and the bridge.

"Stay out of this, Wyoming," Jennie called to the foremost of the oncoming two riders.

Wyoming tilted back his hat with a left thumb, but never reined his loping pony.

Jennie levered to rifle fast; skillfully shooting from the hip, she threw a bullet into the dust only feet ahead of Wyoming's mount. Wyoming reined up quickly then, blocking his companion, who called, "Miss Jennie, we ain't done nodung."

"Then get back to the horse herd." Jennie, levering the Winchester, was ready to shoot again from thigh level.

Ab Meyers half turned. "Jennie," he asked, "Whose side you on?"

Jennie's second rifle slug streaked dust accurately between the halted pair's pomes. "Git!"

Realizing the girl's determination, both riders, wheeling their pomes, spurred back north.

Jennie said, "No killin', Dad."

Ab Myers holstered his pistol. Turning, his boots rang on the planks, then plopped in the dust crossing back toward the saloon.

Not until her father was out of sight in the clapboard saloon did Jennie speak bitterly to Tuck. "Now you can report back to Ute Ford, Mr. Wilds."

"I'd planned to ride around that town going back. I'm no one's spy. But I thank you for your help."

"I wasn't helping you," the girl said quietly, "only keeping Dad from shooting you. He did buy that buggy,

but he didn't see the bloodstains till later, he told me."

"That's understandable, Tuck said. "Nobody'll hold against him."

"They will in Ute Ford." Jennie spoke unhappily. "They've never understood why Dad has three hundred horses and so many riders. They don't know he's always rounding up wild horses, breaking and driving 'em to market in Utah. They like to think he heads a horse thief gang."

"Maybe I'd better ride through Ute Ford and explain the buggy was bought unknowingly."

Jennie shrugged, as if suddenly tired. "What you do is your affair."

Tuck touched his hat brim and reined about. "Adios. I'll pass the word."

"It'll do no good." Jennie's voice was still bitter. "He's already branded, having once been a squaw man." Then she added: "Sorry Dad wouldn't help."

"I'll talk to those jumpers," Tuck said. "Maybe they'll understand." As the dam clattered off the bridge, he watched the girl over a shoulder. Yet when he raised a hand, she remained motionless, unanswering.

Tuck stayed only long enough in Ute Ford to try to explain the Meyers' buggy purchase to the blacksmith, Si Ward, and Mayor Otis; yet when he left, they were unbelievers. Soon, unhappily, he struck along the river trail.

He was leaving the desert coming onto Yellow Creek

at high noon a day later, approaching a park where he had been running cows, when he saw the trickle of smoke ahead. He knew it was not from his home section, where he had built his place from the naked earth. He wondered if the claim jumpers had camped out, not daring to use his buildings. He kneed the dun along in the shelter of a stand of spruce above the creek to investigate.

Suddenly a cowboy yipped. Tuck reined up in his cover.

A rider from the park came high-tailing it after several loose horses, none of which Tuck recognized as his. He sat watching the rider herd the strays back into the park. It was easy to see someone was already using the land he had once claimed as his. Leaving the dun, he stole forward toward the park.

Indian fashion, he crept the last few yards and was soon looking down at the intruders. While before the park had held only some of his cows, it now was jammed with a horse herd circle by two riders. About a low fire under a cottonwood clump four more riders lounged, eating and smoking.

Rage ran through Tuck. He wondered if his cabin, barn and corrals had been taken possession of as well as this park. Before he lost control, he began crawling away from the park. Soon he was back to his dun, mounted, and circling for his ranch-steed.

His ranch buildings were shortly ahead on the west bank of Yellow Creek. Even before he rode from the

timber down toward them, he saw three men on the near side of them. One was riding his precious mower, driving his team of mules, cutting hay. The man's two companions, wielding pitchforks nearby, were making a haystack. All three intruders wore waist guns, Tuck saw.

He checked his Colt and rifle, then proceeded to ride from the timber into the open.

The first of the three men, the mower rider, seeing Tuck, called to the other two. All three stopped work; the two, leaving the stack, began walking across the stubble of the meadow toward the man on the mower, who held the mules stolidly.

Just within rifle range, Tuck pulled up the dun, dismounted and, leaving his rifle in the saddle case, began to walk toward the ranch jumpers.

The three spread out, the two walkers positioning themselves on either side of the mule-team driver, still in the mower seat.

"I'm Tuck Wilds."

The lanky, moustached man seated on the mower showed the flash of his teeth. "So you're the man deserted our place to us?"

"You're S. C. Pepper Chick?"

"That's me." The seated Chick waved to one side at a blinding duplicate of himself, only a younger and completely shaven man. "My brother, Levi." The seated man caught the third man's eye. "Pete Cravens."

"This is my place," Tuck said. "I've built it up, got

cows ranging about, got squatter's rights."

"I've got legal right," grinned Pepper Click. "I've taken out homestead papers."

"I'm sorry about that," Tuck said, trying to keep emotionless. "Surely, being from this area as I hear you are, you know my rights are prior."

Pepper Click said, dismounting, standing on the hay stubble beside the mower, his gun had slapping his holster, "I've got homestead rights and possession; and I'm keeping the place."

His brother, Levi, and Pete Cravens grinned amusedly. Tuck said, sighing, "You want me to take you to law?" Pepper Click's teeth flashed. "You do that, Wilds."

Tuck turned about, hot blood flushing his face, wondering if he would get shot in the back; then he started walking toward his dun.

"Don't you want to try pistol law?" called Levi.

Unanswering, Tuck continued on across the stubble to the dun, a distance beyond the range of the trio's six-guns. The gelding was chewing at the aromatic meadow hay when Tuck came beside him and swiftly slid the Winchester from its case. Levering in a shell fast, he whirled and fired at Pepper Click, now grinning with his two companions.

Tuck's first bullet was not deadly, but Pepper Click, though slammed sideways, stared at his bleeding left arm, unbelieving. His brother, Levi, now turning a startled face to Tuck, began drawing his six-gun. Tuck, levering,

got Levi square with his second bullet, slamming him back and down into the sweet-smelling meadow. Pete Cravens, his six-gun flaming uselessly, for Tuck was beyond six-gun range, Tuck got with his third shot.

With both Levi Click and Pete Cravens down, Tuck levered and looked for Pepper again. At first he did not see him, for Pepper was behind one of the mules, unhooking the trace claims. Then, despite his bleeding arm, Pepper had the off mule free and flung himself low on its neck; thumping his boots on the side of the startled animal, Pepper Click began riding away, as fast as the mule would take him. Tuck could have killed Pepper, but looking at the two downed men, he slid the rifle back in the saddle sheath and mounted.

Pepper, he saw, was heading straight for the park where the riders held the horse herd. Tuck realized allowing Pepper to escape was a mistake. In short order, Pepper would tell those riders what had happened to his brother and Cravens; all of them would be on Tuck Wilds fast.

Tuck spurred the dun up into the timber. He wanted to be away before the riders in the park came.

Beatty's Hell Ranch, on the Utah trail, was twenty miles west across the desert.

4.

As Tuck sludged afoot ahead of the lathered, weary dun, the glare of the alkali and the heat east from hot boulders and sand seemed the only world.

Through the shimmering heat waves the trading post and cabin showed beyond the canyons. Tuck quickly noted the black figures coming outside the buildings into the glare. Beyond Scotty's combination store, saloon and gambling place, his corral ran down to the cottonwood-fringed river, here dirty brown and alkaline, where he kept a scow to ferry onto the far Utah trail.

Minutes later, Tuck saw Scotty, bareback on an Indian paint pony, as usual in buckskins and boots, big hat and gunbelt, followed by two Ute braves.

Reining up his pony, Scotty cried, "When Bone told me he saw you coming, I knew there'd been trouble on Yellow Creek already." Scotty reached down and hauled Tuck up behind him on the little pony. "Did a gang take your ranch like I warned? Did they beat you to the land office?

"Yeah!" Tuck croaked.

Scotty wordlessly gave Tuck's dun's lead rope to the nearest Ute, whirled the paint pony and kicked him. The little pony, carrying double, struggled through the sand toward the river ranch. Soon the two Utes angled away, leading the dust-and sweat-streaked dun toward the corral, where they would dole out water and rub him down.

"How many?" asked Scotty then.

"I shot at three, killed two, but Pepper Click, the claim jumper, rode away for help, only wounded. Six were in a park near with a horse herd—they ran me into the desert."

Scotty reined in front of the post building, and both men slid down by the hitch rack. Inside in the cool interior, the shelved dry goods, the smell of harness and liquor held Tuck as he was poured a drink from a bottle under the plank-and-barrels bar.

"I didn't get you the warning in time then?" Scotty asked unhappily.

"You did," Tuck returned quickly. He explained how he had been sidetracked by the knifing of Jennie's sister, the pursuit of Jed Wolf, then his trail. When he mentioned Jennie's father, Ab Myers, Scotty pursed his lips.

"I've heard Myers was heading, or mixed up with, a gang of horse thieves."

"Jennie says not," Tuck said. "Claims her dad's eating, breaking wild horses, then running them to Utah."

Starting, Scotty laughed, then stopped quickly, staring at Tuck. "You calling a girl by her first name? Never thought I'd see that day from a confirmed bachelor like you. This Jennie must be some girl."

"We were thrown together," Tuck said, feeling his face flush.

"That's how I got married to two Ute squaws," commented Scotty, his eyes twinkling.

Invigorated by the drink, Tuck was feeling better when the Ute brave Bone came through the trading post doorway.

"Scotty," the Ute said, "another rider cross the desert."

Scotty looked at Tuck. "Would just one of these lynchers have followed you?"

Tuck grimaced. "Sheriff Beck 'd have the guts, if he was near and heard what I did. But it'd be chance if he got on my trail this quick, though."

"You'd better hide," said Scotty. "I'll talk to him—or whoever's coming." He motioned to a back room.

The second brave came in silently and spoke in Ute to Scotty so fast Tuck did not catch it all. He did catch, "'Breed woman."

Scotty looked at Tuck, his face malicious, then gleeful. "I did hear that Myers had been a squaw man. This couldn't be the Jennie you mention?"

"I'll see," Tuck said abruptly. He twisted and went through the open doorway. Standing outside in the hot sun, he stared through the burning heat of the desert.

Scotty, followed by the two Utes, joined him.

"It's a girl," Scotty agreed.

"It's Jennie," Tuck admitted, studying the oncoming figure. "Wonder what she's doing here?"

"She looks tired." Scotty turned to the Ute at his elbow. "Tell my women she's coming."

Wordlessly, the chunky, heavy-faced Bone began walking in silent moccasins toward the summer Indian shelter back of the near log cabin home.

"I'd better ride your horse out and help her in," Tuck said suddenly.

"Sure. Anything I have is yours."

Taking a canteen the remaining Ute handed him, Tuck strode over to Scotty's paint horse at the hitch rail, mounted bareback, and kicked the animal toward the oncoming Jennie. The paint seemed almost to drag Tuck's foot soles in the sandy footing, but he quickly brought him near the girl.

Jennie Myers, still attractive in a dust-coated big hat, checkered shirt, jeans and heavy gun belt, again was ~~not~~ de her buckskin, now weary, lathered and plodding. Seeing Tuck approach, Jennie's shoulders seemed to strengthen, and her head flung back, the dusky cheeks ~~evening~~ flushed. Her black eyes fixed on Tuck's.

"Water?" he greeted her, reining up the paint.

"We'll make it on to Hell Ranch," said Jennie. "That's it you rode out from?" She nodded behind him at the buildings.

"You've never been here?"

"No."

"You were taking a chance, riding here alone the first time," Tuck said. "Badlands all about."

Turning the paint, he began walking him beside the buckskin toward the trading post.

Jennie said, "I heard you mention being a friend of Scotty's; and after I found out the trouble you had at Yellow Creek, I trailed you here."

"You know, then, I ran out ahead of a hanging party," Tuck said frankly.

"Made up of Myers' riders." Jennie's voice was bitter. "I'm afraid Dad cottoned to Pepper taking over your ranch because he wants it as a way station. I'm sorry about it." She fell silent, looking away.

"Not your fault," Tuck said. He added: "Did you ride out here to tell me they are coming after me?"

"Not originally. Only after I found Jed Wolf with them at Yellow Creek. I went to your place first to tell you Jed had broken jail."

Tuck remembered Jed's threat to kill him. Jennie had come a long distance to warn him the 'breed was loose. "Thought Sheriff Beck was to take him to the pen."

"Jed knocked out a deputy named Smitty, took guns and a horse and fled. From a store he carted off dynamite, with caps and fuse. I was in Ute Ford, helping Sis, when we heard. Sis was afraid he'd try to kill her

again. She had me put her on the Little Snake stage to the train up north. East, at Dad's folks, she'll be safe."

"I appreciate knowing."

The two were nearing the place where Scotty and the two Ute braves were now joined by Scotty's two squaws, both solid, athletic, if not lovely, women in buckskin dresses, whose brood were beginning to join them. Above those waiting, the weathered false front proclaimed: "Scotty's Store—Saloon—Gamblng."

Tuck pulled up the paint and slid down; but Jennie Myers was already afoot. Scotty's Ute squaws and brood swarmed about her. To Scotty, Tuck said, "Jed Wolf—I told you about him—has broken jail, and Jennie says he's after me, bringing along some Yellow Creek friends."

"The riders with the horse herd?" asked Scotty.

Jennie heard this. "They're Myers' riders. But Dad's back on your place at Elk River; and he doesn't know about Jed's taking them over for this. You see, Jed and Sis when he was riding for Dad."

"Did Jed and the others know you were riding here?" Tuck asked.

"I took off in the night from Yellow Creek," Jennie said. "Levi and Pete Cravens were already buried. Pepper was waiting on Dr. Kincaid."

The squaws led Jennie toward the summer shelter. Behind the cabin by the brush shelter was an outside cooking fire at which the Ute wives busied themselves, regarding Jennie's help.

The two Ute braves squatted in the shade with Scotty and Tuck, smoking, awaiting the venison steak, beans, coffee, and biscuits. Scotty had taught his wives to make. About the area, the children ran and played fairly quietly, even a baby bound in a carrying cradle clutching his father's occasional poking finger.

"What'll be best for you?" asked Scotty of Tuck, thinking aloud.

"If, like Jennie, these men know we're friends, they may expect you to hole me up around here. For that reason, I'd better git. I can't endanger your famuy."

"With a little time," mused Scotty, "I can send for help from the wives' relatives—have half the reservation here. Also, you could ride down to the Ute reservation."

"But I'm not married to a Ute," Tuck reminded him. "Nevertheless, the Utes'd help a friend of mine."

"Only as a last resort," Tuck said thoughtfully. "But I've an idea I'd like to try. It'll get me out of this county. Remember those silver ore samples we found in the canyon under Black Mountain, when we were prospecting our first days in Colorado? I'd like to take some burros and prospect up on top Black. I've thought about that ore since they started doing so well on Bald Mountain. Maybe I could make my time in hiding pay, while this county cooled off."

Scotty slapped a buckskin thigh. "You always swore there was silver on Black Mountain." He sighed. "Sorry I insisted we move along so fast those days. But I was

restless, worried—if too long in one place—" He looked about at the youngsters. "I'm not sorry, though, I settled here."

Scotty's squaw Queen called then, in English, "Come and get it."

Tin plates full, the two white men settled back again on their heels, eating. Some distance away, the two Ute braves wolfed food silently. Scotty said, "I'll get you a fresh horse and supplies, Tuck. Hide your dun."

Jennie asked, "Tuck, what're you planning?"

Briefly, he told her about his idea of riding east and north to Black Mountain.

Jennie turned to Scotty then. "Can you make it two horses, one for me?"

"Why, easily," Scotty spoke in Ute to the two braves, who, through eating now, rose and left silently for the corral by the river.

"I don't want our riders to know I was here," continued Jennie. "They'll recognize my buckskin. Can you hide it out with Tuck's dun? Since he's passing near Elk River, I might as well return that far with him."

Scotty said, "Will do. We're experts here—at hiding horses from sight."

"Don't you need rest?" Tuck asked Jennie anxiously.

"No more than you," she retorted.

Shortly, with stuffed saddle bags and full canteens, Jennie and Tuck were straddling two fresh broncos, while all Scotty's ménage saw them off.

5.

Wolf figured Tuck Wilds to be a man traveling alone, and fast, and he never knew otherwise till he arrived at Pickaxe, a mining town between Green Ridge, Mummy Range, the Laramie Mountains—several miles south of Black Mountain. The town served already working mines on nearby Bald Mountain.

Strange to him, at first, were its six-mule teams, it's trains of ore-laden burros braying gladly at the end of narrow trails down from the high mountain mines. Miners walked the high valley street; the occasional prospectors gave the feel that one lucky strike, a lode, a rich vein of silver, and the hardships endured were paid for by fortune.

The discreet inquiry Wolf made about Tuck Wilds revealed his quarry was not in the town area. Little as he knew of mining, he calculated that if Tuck Wilds intended to prospect Black Mountain, he would stop at Pickaxe, it being the nearest town, for last minute supplies, probably even burros.

He was about to leave the hotel on his second morning when down the street before him came Tuck Wilds, riding a bronco, with four long-eared burros plodding in tow. On one swaying pack saddle were twin boxes of blasting powder. To remain unseen, Wolf drew back in the hotel lobby, merely watching Wilds pass. Shortly afterwards, Wolf jubilantly checked out at the hotel desk and left for the livery stable, where the spotted Indian pony rested.

Within half an hour after sighting him, Wolf was following Wilds toward Black Mountain. The trail was fair for a few miles, but Wolf kept well behind, out of sight, tracking by hoof prints. When the tracks entered a gulch, Wolf had to slow the spotted pony, for the burros held back Wilds. Once Wolf found where Wilds had had to throw several rocks to urge one burro along the dark, forbidding gulch.

Mountains now rose on either side of a creek, darkly ascending in a series of benches. The trail began to be rougher, climbing steadily out of the gulch. Now Wolf raised his rifle in the saddle sheath.

Above the timber line that afternoon, the slope to the dark ridge skyline of Black Mountain was steep. The burros were taking the incline well; but Wolf saw that, as the air became harder to breathe, Wilds stopped occasionally and rested his stock.

From his discreet inquiries about the mountain, Wolf realized that, once Wilds reached the ridge on the mountain top ahead, he would have to stop. The trail did not

go beyond; the black rock ridge atop the mountain dropped on the other side something like a thousand feet down—a sheer precipice.

The way Wilds was playing into his hands amused Wolf. It was Wolf's rifle from one side, a drop from a cliff on the other side for Wilds. Wolf decided then to amuse himself before the fatal shot.

Wolf never ate riding up the mountain, like his quarry; and whom he came near the top he realized Wilds, dismounted, unpacked, evidently having hobbled his stock, was building a fire. Wolf felt hunger. However, he bound the spotted pony's nose, tied him, took his rifle, levered a shell into the chamber, and began to crawl Indian fashion up the remnant of trail to the ridge on the skyline.

Wilds was cooking supper, boiling beans.

Wolf had to shoot, he realized, before darkness. As he snaked toward the ridge, he began to see the sunset reflections on the peaks and deep canyons all about the ridge.

A rock loosened under him just within rifle shot range, but he caught the black chunk with a hand before it rattled and slid down the slope. He quieted then, looking up at Wilds, who remained squatting, obviously feeling safe, some distance from his saddle gear and packs. As Wolf watched, Wilds bent to add more sticks to his fire.

Wolf eased his rifle forward, aimed, and fired—not at Wilds, but at a burro—to add to his victim's torment. The stricken burro, screaming, lurched and went over the far side of the ridge, hurtling down to death in the canyon

below the cliff.

As Wolf expected, Wilds moved—but not for his rifle. Wilds dropped flat on the black, rough rocks of the ridge. Wolf could still see enough of Wilds to kill him despite the upward incline; instead, he shot a second burro, which followed the first over the cliff, its tortured death-cry chilling.

Suddenly, before Wolf could lever and fire again, Wilds slid out of sight.

Wolf rose, dismayed, and sprinted up the last incline. Panting in the thin, high air, darting glances about, he topped the ridge.

Except for the shying bronco, the two remaining, heshawing burros, the packs, the kettle and coffeepot on the fire, the black rocks of the ridge top were bare. First Wolf felt cheated. Then he realized that Wilds could only have slid over the skyline, disappeared over the cliff.

Smiling, Wolf went toward the brink of the cliff to peer down. Wilds' body must even now be hurtling down the thousand-foot drop in space—or be smashed on the canyon floor.

As the second hobbled burro went over the cliff from the amazebur, falling downward in space after striking nearby rocks, Tuck realized Jed was toying with him. Tuck wore his waist Colt, but Jed was beyond six-gun range, and hidden. If he could close with Jed, he could

strike back. Yet there was insufficient cover on the ridge rocks. He could be killed when Jed chose, exposed as he was on the ridge.

If he rose and charged down the incline at the ambusher, it was certain suicide, and he would do Jed no harm; he could be dropped before he got in range. Then the fact that the second burro struck rocks after going over the cliff reminded him what he had observed on first looking over the ridge.

There was a ledge of rock slanting from the top down the sheer face of the cliff, as he remembered. The ledge was narrow, seemingly impassable due to overhead rocks; but rather than remain to be killed at Wolf's whim, perhaps he could crawl down the ledge a way on his hands and knees. At least it would be better than the suspense of waiting for Jed Wolf to blast him over the rim of the ridge as he had done the two burros.

Even as Tuck decided to act, he began snaking along the black rocks to the lip of the drop. His luck could have been no better. He was above the start of the ledge trail, slanting down a hundred or so feet along the face of cliff! His quick movement took him over the edge of the skyline in action that gave him no time to be afraid. On all fours, he crawled down along the slanting ledge of rock, rubbing almost against the cliff wall with one shoulder and hip, the other shoulder and hip seemingly hanging over a bottomless void. The thousand-foot drop yawned beside him.

He paused. No third rifle shot came. The duo of remaining burros still continued bee-hawing on the ridge above by the nervously nickerling bronco.

Panting in the high, thin air of the ledge, he came under an overhang of rocks that would partially conceal him from above, but let him peer up there. It was here that he first noted signs of human cutting to widen the narrow, descending ledge where he crept. He began to have an idea now as to where this descending ledge of rock would end; but he dismissed the idea immediately. For he knew that nothing could stop Jed Wolf from looking over the lip of the cliff, staring down to see where he was, what had become of him.

He slid out his Colt carefully, cocked it, and tried to assume the best position possible to await the half-breed; but, no matter how he tried, his head was always down the cliff, lower than his hips and feet. He felt it an incongruous way to die, and anger built in him.

Suddenly he saw Jed, a puzzled look on his face, looking out from the ridge, not down at him. Rock dust settled lightly into the air, stirred by Jed's boots.

"Jed," he cried, "down here!"

Jed started, intending to jerk back out of view.

But, Tuck's finger pressing the trigger, the .45 bucked, and Tuck saw Jed Wolf slammed back onto the ridge of black rocks, the very impact of the bullet preserving him from a horrible fall into the canyon.

Tuck holstered the pistol, fearful that, unless it chanced

to be fatal, the bullet shock would immobilize Jed only temporarily. Just above Tuck the ledge widened a bit, so he could turn about; he backed there and turned, his feet thrust over a thousand feet of air. Then, still on all fours, he began to crawl back up the ledge toward the top of the ridge.

Tuck scrambled, animal fashion, hoping not to come onto Jed awaiting him on the skyline with a drawn weapon. Yet hurriedly as he crawled up along the narrow ledge, as he slid onto the ridge top he found Jed already beginning to sit up.

Swiftly Tuck stood erect, pistol in hand, and dashed at the ambusher. His boot kicked at Wolf's jaw even as the breed reached for his holster. While Jed Wolf crumpled, Tuck snatched free the revolver. Even as he thrust it in his waistband, he kicked Wolf's rifle off the cliff into space.

Jed, stunned, moaning, flat on his back, grimaced up at Tuck, his eyes sick but savage. The left side of Wolf's checkered flannel shirt was soaked from running blood. The wound, starting from lower on his side, ascended bloodily toward his left shoulder blade.

"I should kill you," said Tuck.

"You helped me before."

"You forgot it fast." Thoughtfully, seeing Jed's knife sheath empty, Tuck leaned over the wounded man and felt for the knife. He found it loose inside the bloody shirt front. Despite a further search, including a search

of Wolf's hoots, no other hide-out weapon was revealed. Finally Tuck slid off Jed's gunbelt, strapped it about him with his own, and put Jed's knife back in its sheath.

"I'll help you again," Tuck said. "But I'll be sorry later, I'm sure. There's more rattlesnake in you, Jed, than man."

Jed mouthed unemotionally.

Looking at the bloody left side, Tuck grunted, "I'll button your shirt, see what I can do for you."

He studied the explosive, irregular track of the soft lead driven by the black powder from where, he believed, it had broken a lower rib, perhaps two, then followed the outer surface of the rib cage upward around the body, not lodging, but leaving a wound almost resembling that of a rifle bullet.

"You'll live, Jed."

Having raised his head, Jed studied his bloody side; he, too, was acquainted with gunshots. "I need a doctor I saw one's sign in Pickaxe."

"I'm debating whether to move you there or fetch a doctor." From one of his packs, Tuck brought a bottle of whiskey. Jed caught the uncorked bottle and gulped eagerly. "All I've got's in that bottle. It'll have to do till the doctor has looked at you."

Sullenly, Jed handed back the bottle; but, after corking it, Tuck placed it beside the wounded man. Carefully he bound Jed's bleeding side with bandages made of clothing from his own saddlebag. Finally he squatted,

smoking and thinking, while darkness settled over the mountain peaks and deep canyons.

Jed asked sullenly, "When're you starting for the doctor?"

Tuck sighed. "If'll have to be morning. I don't know the trail down well enough to dare it at night. We're just lucky this is a warm summer. We could be sleeping in snow, not able even to get a burro up here or out."

With full darkness, cold air swept the ridge. With little effort, Tuck found and ungreased the Indian paint Jed had been riding, brought back the injured man's soogan and added a blanket of his own. However, Jed slept only fitfully, moaning, occasionally tossing. In the pre-dawn, Tuck used his altitude kettle and made broth. In the firelight, Jed's eyes were sunken now, his unshaven cheeks almost yellow; for though Tuck had managed to staunch the major flow of blood, Jed still bled onto the bandages, suffering continuous pain. Tuck knew it was safe to leave the burros on the ridge with Jed as he was; the wounded man was too sick to go anywhere. Already the whiskey bottle beside Jed was low.

"I'll make this trip quick as I can," Tuck said. "But if the doctor's out on a call, it'll be a while—"

Jed nodded weakly. Tuck saddled up his bronco and began the first leg of the trip down the mountain.

Dr. Baker, the first physician Tuck reached, was free to treat Jed; he brought along a travois hitched to a gentle

pony, and a volunteer to help return Jed to town. The volunteer was a shifty-eyed, down-at-the-heels prospector who called himself only Charlie.

Fast as they could move, it was again almost sunset before the riders came onto the high black ridge and found Jed bandaged in his soogan, alive, rational, but weak.

Dr. Baker set about his work in a businesslike manner. Jed was shot with a hypodermic of morphia, and the doctor ordered Charlie and Tuck about efficiently.

In the darkness of early night, after the doctor's surgery, they ate cold biscuits, drank coffee and chewed jerky, while Jed slept.

Charlie, the down-at-the-heels prospector, wrapped in his blankets near Tuck, asked curiously, "I've never prospected this mountain. Any luck?"

Tuck guessed Charlie thought Jed Wolf had tried to kill him to steal a rich strike. He answered, "Years ago I found rock samples below the cliff, but I'd only just gotten here this time to try the top. Wolf here had a grudge against me; I caught him for the law." He added no more details.

"Revenge, huh?"

Dr. Baker, sleeping near Jed, stirred. "What's that?"

Before Tuck could answer, Charlie repeated Tuck's words. The doctor's snores ended the discussion.

As Tuck fell asleep, the only sound in the night was the ceaseless movement of the hobbled animals and the oc-

casional coughing of the fitful, cold, high air.

After eating flapjacks fried in bacon grease and washing them down with coffee, the three able-bodied men lifted Jed onto the doctor's travois. The doctor said, "Wilds, Charlie and I can take Wolf down. He'll live to pay me later. You owe nothing to an ambusher."

Tuck, however, drew out his long leather money poke. "I want to pay his fee. Maybe he'll get over this revenge idea."

While Charlie stared closely, seemingly disappointed Tuck had only legal tender money, Tuck replaced his money poke; Dr. Baker pocketed what he had thought necessary to get Jed on his feet. Tuck mentioned nothing about Jed being wanted by the law; for he was in that same category now.

The travois started its slow descent down the forty-five degree angle trail in the dawn. When almost out of sight, the doctor turned and waved back at Tuck. Charlie kept looking down the trail.

When the two, with the travois, were out of sight, Tuck slid carefully over the side of the cliff onto the ledge that descended along the precipice of rock. He was curious about the trail the nonexistent prospector ahead of him had cut along the dangerous wall. On hands and knees, he descended the ledge, his head again lower than his haunches. On one side of him again was sheer, black rock; on the other, the steep drop a thousand feet down.

Almost a hundred feet down the cliff, under a split in the rocks, was a broader strip of ledge—and blasted into the sheer face of the precipice was a short tunnel off it! Seeing it, Tuck felt his blood run faster.

He crept cautiously into the dark, wet, cool tunnel; it angled. Suddenly his hands felt something definitely not a rock. He struck a match and held it before him, looking carefully.

It was a human bone, and it told its own story. The lone prospector, on hands and knees, had carried blasting powder down the narrow ledge to bore this tunnel. Here in this dangerous, hard rock hole, he had been drilling in the rock with a steel bit, tamping in powder, exploding it by fuse. Maybe he had lighted a fuse, or drilled into unexploded powder. Anyway, an explosion had killed or disabled him. He had died here in this hole in the face of the cliff, maybe to be eaten by buzzards or other wild birds.

As Tuck lit match after match, rapidly studying the black tunnel end, he saw the dead man had reached and uncovered the rich vein of silver he sought in that last explosion. The final blast that left the prospector's bones there was an irony of fate. Even in these boom days of silver, the strike promised to be rich, despite its location. Quickly Tuck thought of Charlie, the frustrated, suspicious prospector who had come up the mountain with Dr. Baker.

Sighing, Tuck gathered up the bones of the unknown

prospector in the shirt he stripped off, preparatory to take them on his back up the to the ridge; he would find a decent burial spot for his benefactor. He realized this was a claim as yet unlisted, and he must get assay samples, make a trip to town, and file on the claim before somebody else did. He could not lose this silver claim as he had lost his ranch.

He could hardly stop with samples, for the silver fever held him. He had brought on his burros blasting powder, pick, shovel, the tools of a prospector. He worked the tunnel for two days, and by midday of the third day, he had carried out several gunny sacks of ore, some to a place on the broader ledge of rock at the mouth of the tunnel; some up to the ridge top.

Suddenly, as he brought a sack from the ore hole, his burros began to hee-haw startlingly.

Standing on the ledge before the tunnel, the only place on the trail he dared stand, Tuck leaned his head back and stared up at the black lip of the ridge. Sure enough, in only minutes, during which whoever was up above could easily verify he was not there, but that he had carried up several gunny sacks of rich ore, and as yet had put in no winch or rope to do it, a figure stared down over the brink of the cliff at him.

The figure—Charlie—called, "You can get down there?"

"Yes, I'll be coming up pronto."

"Thought you might not mind me coming back,"

Charlie continued loudly.

"No, of course not."

Not taking any of the gunny sacks on the ledge so as to be free in case of trouble, Tuck dropped onto his hands and knees and began to ascend the slanting rock ledge along the face of the cliff.

A rock, loosened by Charlie's foot, came hurtling downward, striking the cleft in the rock above, then shooting out and down to the canyon bottom far below.

"Careful up there!" Tuck yelled, hurrying along to where an overhang of rocks would temporarily protect him.

Charlie disappeared for a few seconds.

"Then, just as Tuck neared the overhang of rocks, he saw Charlie directly above it on the ridge, bending over, shoving over one of the gunny sacks of ore,

Tuck could not even cry aloud. He sweated in a final desperate effort to crawl to the rock overhang. The gunny sack hit the ledge as he snaked to safety. The gunny sack split and ore rock went tumbling out over the ledge, but it did not touch Tuck, though it enveloped him momentarily in a choking cloud of dust.

Charlie screamed in a rage: "I'll git ye!"

Putting out his head, fearfully looking upward, with rock clutched in one hand to throw, the only weapon available, Tuck saw Charlie swing out a second gunny sack of ore. The prospector was holding this sack by the neck.

Tuck threw the rock upward, a seeming futile attack.

Suddenly Tuck saw the murderous prospector was overbalanced as he swayed, scared of being hit. He dropped the heavy ore sack too late as one of his feet near the edge of the ridge top slipped.

Charlie fell, screaming.

He hit the rock overhang above Tuck almost simultaneously with the second sack. The torn sack, spilling like the first, dropped its rocks with Charlie's body past Tuck. In a few seconds Charlie's body was only a blob on the rock bottom of the canyon far below.

6.

After Charlie's death, Tuck hurriedly put out his claim stakes and cached powder and tools and nonessentials. By late afternoon he brought up onto the ridge the last of the gunny sacks of ore he intended to take along. That last night on the black rocks of the ridge, Tuck could hardly sleep. At dawn, he started down the forty-five-degree trail with the pony and the two nimble-footed burros, their packs swaying heavily, their long ears wagging, eager to leave the rarefied air.

By late afternoon Tuck was in the assay office in Pickaxe, having filed his mine papers, and being assured he was working on unfiled, rich vein. Shortly afterward, he sold his burros cheap to an elderly prospector at the livery stable, a man who looked as if he needed a run of good luck. Tuck ate at the Chinese restaurant, a good big meal of steak and potatoes and thick coffee; then he sought a room and a good night's sleep at the hotel.

Before he left Pickaxe the next day, he stopped at Dr. Baker's office, intending to see if the doctor needed more money to care for Jed Wolf. The doctor, saying Wolf would soon be freed from the primitive two-room private hospital, advised Tuck against seeing Wolf, which, Tuck realized now, was wise. He recalled Wolf's evil, unforgiving nature. And Jed promised soon to be a well man.

During the ride to Denver, some seventy-five miles, Tuck did not push the bronco, but made it without trouble. On an early morning in Denver, he sought a man he had heard of as being honest, an English mining engineer who bought claims for a Great Britain concern. Tuck found the engineer at an office near his hotel, guarded by a male secretary.

Dobbs, the engineer, an angular, raw-boned man, twisted around from a roll-top desk, rose from his chair and took Tuck's hand in a hard grip.

"Tuck Wilds?" the mining man asked. "We've not met?"

"No," Tuck sat facing the other, told briefly how he had decided to check Black Mountain and had found the rock ledge leading down to a tunnel in the face of the cliff. He mentioned neither Jed Wolf nor Charlie. He explained the solitary death of the original mine prospector who had left no trace of his name or family and who had not even lived to file his claim.

Dobbs asked shrewdly, "You a cowboy or rancher?"

"I ranched awhile," Then, trusting Dobbs, Tuck felt it safe to explain how he had not legally homesteaded his ranch on Yellow Creek, and it had been jumped. When he mentioned killing two jumpers and wounding the third, Dobbs looked at him strangely.

"In England—" the engineer said, smiling—"but this is a new land, where each man packs his own law. According to the code, you had seven years squatter's

rights. I bet you built a nice ranch."

"I did. Too nice to have stolen."

"Well, you're here about the mine—let's see the assay report." Then, one after another, Dobbs studied several ore samples Tuck packed, maps, and his claim papers.

Tuck silently waited until the big Englishman straightened his frame and flexed his work-hardened, brown fingers.

"You know what you've found?" he asked.

"I think. I hope—" Tuck faltered for once.

"The only difficulty 'll be getting the ore out, down the mountain to Pickaxe. Our company is skillful at that," Dobbs finished.

"That's why I came to you."

Dobbs looked at Tuck, his eyes level. "You've heard of me?"

"If I didn't trust you, I'd not be here."

"Draw your chair closer," said Dobbs, "Let's figure."

"Let's." Tuck drew up beside the other at the open roll-top desk. The figures they arrived at satisfied Tuck. The contract was drawn up by the male stenographer

Dobbs finally asked, handing Tuck the option, "This satisfactory?"

Tuck studied the option; there was money enough down to make him feel good, and the royalties were to run as long as the silver vein was worked. Gulping, Tuck said, "Better'n I expected."

Tuck did not realize most of the day was gone till

Dobbs took him to supper. After they ate, Dobbs wiped his lips with his napkin and said, "Only one thing. This is personal advice to you. Now you've money enough to hire a good lawyer, give yourself up to Sheriff Beck and stand trial for that shooting affair. You'll never regret it."

Tuck shook his head in disagreement. "Not yet. I don't think the time's ripe. I intend to ride back to my place on Yellow Creek, take it over and then see what happens. Then, maybe, I'll take your advice."

Dobbs shook his head, his brown eyes puzzled. "If I lived here the rest of my life, I'd never figure you North Americans out."

Later, when the two parted, arrangements were made to meet next day at a Denver bank to get the first financial payment settled on Tuck by the company Dobbs represented.

Tuck rode west fast, hoping to cross the Continental Divide at Berthoud Pass, by-passing the towns. So happy was he to head for Yellow Creek, he hardly noticed until he rode the winding riverbank trail of the White in the late afternoon, less than a day's ride from his ranch, that the bronco was gaunted.

Looking for a choice park to stop and rest the bronco, he suddenly heard children's shouts and the barking of a dog ahead. Startled, he wondered who had settled in that beautiful but lonely spot with a family. These

children and their parents were his Yellow Creek neighbors. The youngsters' joy perked up his drooping spirits and eased his worry about the future.

Near where thick grass ran to a river pool, a wobbly-wheeled mover's wagon rested, tongue down, pointing at a new one-room cabin made of cottonwood logs, not yet chinked, the dirt roof completed, but already out of line. Attached to the back of the house was an unfinished lean-to, obviously meant as a barn, for corral poles ran from it to the river, and in them stood two work horses, desolately looking at the grass outside the corral. Inside the poles, the team, and the rootings of a herd sow, which grunted and moved about importantly, had stripped the corral down to naked earth.

Tuck reined up the tired bronco and called, "Hello, there."

Shouting and laughing, three children darted around the far corner of the awry cottonwood cabin. The youngsters' hands were muddy and grass-stained; they had been at work chinking the horizontal opening between the logs of the cabin walls. Two were girls, the youngest one maybe five, a flaxen-haired beauty, despite her dirty long calico gown and bare feet; the second girl, seven or thereabouts, was brown-haired, more shy, a little lady

The third youngster, a boy about nine, at first swept along by his sisters, on seeing Tuck slowed his run to a walk and kicked bare toes in the grass, halting.

Tuck stared at the children silently now.

"Hi, cowboy," the five-year-old girl cried, stopping almost at Tuck's right stirrup.

The little lady of seven said, "Light, mister. We'll tell Pa and Ma you're here."

The boy, his eyes big and round, studied the resplendent new saddle and bridle Tuck had picked up in Denver. "You work hereabout, *amigo*?" The boy stumbled over the Spanish word.

Tuck chuckled. "I'm your neighbor from over on Yellow Creek."

From the cabin doorway peered a gaunt, sallow-faced woman, her wash-faded dress nearly touching the earthen floor, yet not concealing her bare feet; she seemed weak. When she spoke, her Kentucky mountain-ridge dialect carried Tuck back through the years to his youth; the mother said only, "Pa's a-comin'."

From down along the river bank, just past the bare earth of the corral, shambled the family father, also seemingly over-tired. His pants were held up by one greasy gallus; one shoe was cracked along the side; his shirt was split in back, open in front, and coming out of his trousers. As he came along, he occasionally used the axe for a cane. Yet he seemed hardly middle-aged.

The father nodded at Tuck. "Howdy. Light."

Tuck dismounted and stretched out his hand. "I'm Tuck Wilds. Ranched till recently over on Yellow Creek."

"A Kentuckian." The family father took Tuck's hand in his weakly. "I'm Walt Reese."

The boy exclaimed, "You the feller shot two men and wounded another?"

"*Amigo*, they moved in on my ranch," Tuck said apologetically.

Reese nodded, looking at Tuck. "You look to be doin' well. Us, except the kids, are feeling sickly. Finding it hard to find vittles here, too."

Tuck looked at the pigpen by the cabin, but said, "With trout in the river by your door? Deer and elk coming to the pool, too, at night?"

"No rifle," said Reese abjectly. "Had to sell mine for grub."

Tuck turned and reached back in his saddle-roll. "Here's an old one of mine. Still real good. I had a run of luck and got a new one in Denver. Take this as a neighbor's gift. It'll help you keep the table loaded."

Walt Reese wiped his palms on his pants and took the rifle. "I shouldn't."

"I insist."

The boy, still intent on Tuck's Yellow Creek shooting, said, "Mr. Wilds, a saddle tramp coming through said that your ranch house is vacant now. This Pepper Click is scared to live in it; he's campin' out in a park nearby, kind of hidin' out, I gathered."

"Thanks for the news, *amigo*."

The boy said, "My name's Tom, mister."

The mother, who had disappeared back in the cabin, now reappeared in the doorway. "Vittles is started,"

she called, wiping her sweating face, "anybody feels able to eat."

"Come in, Wilds," Walt Reese said, taking a step around. Stumbling on a hound, he kicked the animal weakly; it ran, howling, toward the river. "The woman and I been porely lately—"

That Tuck should eat the hule of these poor people raised a lump in his throat. "I can't," he said. "Sorry. I wanted to push on—this close to my place."

"Then," said Walt Reese, thrusting Tuck's old rifle back to him unhappily, "I kin't take your gift."

Down where the kicked hound leaped, still howling, along the river, a buck deer bounded up. Tuck levered a shell in the rifle returned to him, aimed, and fired quickly; the buck stumbled and went down.

"I'll stay for supper," Tuck said, "if you'll take this meat when it's dressed and keep the rifle."

"Pleased," said Walt Reese, his eyes wet, taking the rifle back when Tuck returned it.

After Jed Wolf rode east from Yellow Creek trailing Tuck Wilds, the Myers riders, including Pepper Click, returned to the park where the horse herd was being held; within a day the riders started the drive to Utah, leaving Click alone. Click wondered if the thought of Tuck Wilds returning hurried them off Yellow Creek. Neither was Pepper sure Wolf could keep Wilds occupied; and he packed up, including the several sticks of

dynamite, caps, and fuse Jed had brought to blow up Wilds if he returned to his cabin, and left the ranch, not wanting to be found there by Wilds, in case he doubled back on Jed.

When days went by and Click saw no trace of Wilds, he began thinking of leaving the park to return to the ranch—it was legally his now, he reminded himself. Then, just when he started riding down from a high pasture above Yellow Creek to check the XTW before moving back, he saw a distant rider coming in cautiously on the buildings. Among the items he had picked up from Wilds' place was a pair of field glasses. Pulling his horse into some aspen, Pepper studied the horse and rider approaching the Wilds' ranch.

The rider was hard to identify quickly, for the gear was new, the clothes fancier than those he remembered Wilds wearing. But as Pepper watched the man leap into the cabin, rifle at ready, he recognized Tuck Wilds!

Wilds had evaded Jed Wolf, or done away with him! Pepper pulled his horse around, cursing, and made again for his park camp, not too distant. He decided then that, if he could not have the cabin to use, neither would Tuck Wilds.

Back at his camp, he ate, then smoked, thinking. Jed's dynamite gave him his solution. He would be able to do away with Wilds at the same time he demolished the cabin. He packed the dynamite sticks, caps, and fuse in the dark and started toward Wilds' buildings.

In the darkness, almost a mile from the cabin, Pepper tied his horse, took the explosives, and continued cautiously toward the buildings on foot.

Coming in a circle from the west, Pepper saw the cabin was already dark; and he thanked the supreme confidence of Tuck Wilds. He had no doubt Wilds had double-barred his door before going to sleep; all Pepper needed to do was steal quietly outside the cabin. To do this, he dropped into the grass to crawl the last hundred or so yards back of the house.

Once there, with his knife he began to dig out dirt by the foundation of the cabin. By pausing and listening, he did this quietly. Next he thrust the dynamite sticks in the hole, tamped and capped them. Backing away, he played out the fuse by feel; then, yards away by a box elder, he reached in his pocket, drew out a sulphur match and lighted the fuse.

Seeing the line fizzing, Pepper stood up and began to hurry away. He circled back toward his horse shortly. Suddenly he heard the clip-clop of a tired horse approaching the ranch buildings.

A boyish voice yelled, "That you, Mr. Wilds?"

Realizing the oncoming rider heard him or glimpsed him, Pepper bolted and ran openly. The boy cried out again, as if unbelieving; then behind, after a time, Pepper heard the thunder of the dynamite exploding. He made it to his horse then and spurred away at a gallop, not looking behind.

7.

At the boyish yell of his name outside the cabin, Tuck Wilds, trained to sleep light and with arms nearby after years of guarding corral stock against red and white renegades, found himself thrusting feet into boots, then coming erect, gunbelt in one hand, rifle in the other. When the second cry came even as he unbarred the door, he recognized the voice of little nine-year-old Tom Reese; and wondered what the boy was doing here in the night. Buckling his gunbelt with his left hand, holding the rifle ready to fire in his right, Tuck Wilds sprang outside, across the porch, and toward the sound of the boy's cry.

The next instant the cabin exploded behind him. The logs of the wall and the roof seemed to collapse simultaneously, with a roaring sound, as if hurled together and up. Tuck stopped, stunned, amazed.

"Mr. Wilds!" screamed young Tom Reese, very near him, yet fortunately even farther from the explosion than he.

"Here!" Tuck cried.

In the distance Tuck thought he heard a horse crashing through brush. But the sound was faint, and he could be imagining it. However, the explosion was only too real.

Dust, bits of debris settled onto the cabin site, in which logs were now beginning to burn.

The small Reese boy, his heels thumping the ribs of a family work horse, loomed dark in the night. "Who was that man running away?" the boy cried.

"Maybe Pepper Clark. What does it matter? You calling 'Wilds' saved me from being blown to death!"

"Oh!" The boy began to sob.

Tuck helped the boy from the worn work horse. "What brought you here this time of night, *amigo*?"

"Pa and Ma! They're both a-bed, bad sick; and my sisters are getting porely! Pa sent me to see if you'd hep us!"

Tuck thought of the flaxen-haired girl-child who had looked at him and said, "Hi, cowboy," and the second sister, the brown-haired little lady of seven. "I'll ride with you, Tom; but I'll have to find something to wear." Looking back at the cabin, where flames now licked, he recalled nothing was left there. He had not brought his saddlebags in from the barn yet; in them were his old jeans and shirt, where he had stowed them when he bought the new garb in Denver. Too, his new horse gear was in the barn, the saddle safe on the top corral pole.

Seeing the cabin was burning beyond help, and that

the barn was safe along with the sheds, he said, "Come along, *amigo*." He started for the barn.

Tuck gratefully took his old worn jeans and shirt from the saddlebags; finally, dressed and accoutered, he said to Tom, "We'll have to leave your horse here, he's done in. You can ride a gentle bronco back; I'll peel one of these corral buckers for myself."

As he took the old horse's bridle off and turned him into the corral, he saw Tom had ridden from the Reese cabin to Yellow Creek bareback. "I've an old stock saddle here," Tuck said. "Not much, but I'll shorten the stirrups; and it's yours. Shore your seat can stand the ride back?"

"I'll make it," Tom said proudly.

"You will," Tuck agreed.

When Tom got so tired he could not ride alone, Tuck took him up before him on the bay he was riding, held him, and led his horse. That was the way they came to the Reese cabin on White River in early daylight.

This time no one came out. Tuck reined up and, carrying Tom, dismounted. Tuck placed the sleeping boy on the earth outside temporarily and shouldered his way into the cabin.

The cabin interior was a veritable pigsty. The father and mother were in one bunk against the wall, their blankets besmirched. The two girls were huddled in another bunk, their grass-filled mattress and covers also

filthy. Apparently none of the sick family had been up for over a day. Whatever disease they had, all had the same illness. Tuck was amazed Tom still remained well.

The father whispered to himself in a delirium. The mother, unsleeping, complained of abdominal pains. After making and placing Tom on a pallet, Tuck unbuckled his gunbelt and hung it by the door. Then he set to work. He boiled clean drinking utensils and gave each patient a drink; he then rewashcd all drinking cups and dirty dishes; afterward, he took off the filthy bedcovers, even the bed garments of the sick, and boiled them outside in the iron kettle used to do laundry.

When Tom woke and began walking stiffly and sorely about the cabin, Tuck said, "One of us has got to get to Ute Ford and bring Dr. Kincaid."

"I will," Tom said, turning painfully.

"You won't," Tuck said. "You're saddle sore, aren't you?"

Tom nearly cried as Tuck made him put unsalted lard on the inflammation from the unaccustomed riding.

"You'll have to be the nurse till I return," Tuck said. "I'll hurry."

Riding all night, Tuck arrived in Ute Ford in the early heat of day, the bay lathered and worn; he spurred down the street unhesitatingly for Dr. Kincaid's office.

He strode into the inner office.

"I know," the doctor said, "Somebody's bad—I get so I can tell by the way horses are ridden up."

Briefly Tuck told the doctor about the Reese family. "We've got to hurry, Doc."

Dr. Kincaid, picking up his bag, nodded. "You'd better get a fresh horse at the livery. I'll stop and ask Mrs. Kelly to send a rider for Jennie Myers."

"When'd she start nursing?" Tuck asked, surprised.

"She's a girl can help several days," Dr. Kincaid retorted. "She will; and she'll not say anything about a certain Tuck Wilds, whom Sheriff Beck has been looking for lately. I can only stay awhile; I've got a real sick patient here in Ute Ford. After that climaxes, I'll return to the Reese place a second time. Jennie and you can nurse the family, give them medicine, till my return trip."

"Sure," Tuck said weakly.

"With typhoid," said Dr. Kincaid, "the Reese family will take several days of nursing, and plenty of it."

"I'll get a fresh horse, of course," Tuck said. "Want me to meet you at Mrs. Kelly's hotel?"

"Make it the livery," said the doctor soberly. "The hostler there is more close-mouthed than Mrs. Kelly."

When they loped up to the Reese cottonwood log cabin by the river, Tuck hoped to see little Tom come outside, and when this did not happen, he glanced at Dr. Kincaid worriedly.

"The boy, Tom, is probably down now, too," the doctor said, glancing up at the lowering sun.

They dismounted in the tall grass; and the doctor,

carrying his black bag, went ahead through the open doorway. Sure enough, Tom was sick now, too, moaning on his pallet of blankets on the earth floor. The cabin interior was not as filthy as when Tuck had left, but the blankets and grass-filled mattresses of the family were again in need of washing. The wife and father were now both in delirium; the small girls moaned steadily.

"I washed the beds and bedclothing yesterday," Tuck said resignedly. "I guess I'd better do it again."

"I reckon," said Dr. Kincaid quietly. "I've got to dig out my calomel, perchloride of mercury—"

Soon Tuck lighted a kerosene lamp, the only one, to push back the gathering darkness. He found himself helping the doctor administer his drugs. Moving from bunk to bunk, neither man slept all night, saying little as they nursed the moaning patients.

At dawn, when the doctor said, "I've got to see about my Ute Ford case. It should be climaxing soon; afterwards, I'll return," Tuck merely nodded. The doctor left Tuck the medicines to use for the next few days, with directions.

He was just through bathing the family, male and female alike, as Dr. Kincaid ordered, at the end of day when he heard a horse approaching. He buckled on his gunbelt and stepped to the cabin doorway.

Dismounting from her buckskin, Jennie Myers had never seemed so lovely.

He strode out of the cabin through the tall grass toward

her. "*Diós, I'm glad to see a woman!*"

"Doc was secretive enough," she said. "I thought it was you who was sick. I'm glad it isn't."

"It's the whole Reese family," he said; "but the doctor's got them feeling some better already. He had a bad case in town; he'll return later, he said."

"Let's see them," Jennie's dark eyes looking at Tuck were unbelievably soft.

Tuck led the way into the cabin.

Jennie immediately took charge of things, only asking Tuck details about the medicines. Both were busy for the rest of the day. Toward midnight, Jennie said, "Better go outside and sleep, Tuck. You look like you haven't for several nights."

"I—" Then he remembered she was right, and obeyed.

He woke when the sun struck him, rose and washed. When she came near, he said, "Jennie, you should have wakened me."

"Cut some more wood; I'll cook us a bit outside," she stated, ignoring his comment. "We need more than broth."

Until Tuck bit into the venison steak and biscuits, he had not realized how famished he was. He had been dieting, fasting, like the patients inside. "Never ate cooking like this," he told her. Then, "Don't you think the family's looking better?"

"We don't need the doctor." Jennie's eyes were warm on him. "You're a man to ride the river with, I believe,"

she spoke abruptly

Tuck nearly choked, finally gulped down the steak in his mouth.

"Know who I thought you were when you rode up?" he asked shortly.

"Sheriff Beck or Jed Wolf?"

"Beck. Wolf is back at Pickaxe—"

"No more," Jennie said. "He rode onto our place at Elk River, secreted himself with Dad, and now he's working with our horse herd." Her voice was bitter.

"After the way he treated your sister?" Tuck could not keep the surprise from his voice.

"I think Dad's scared of him. Wolf has convinced himself Sis isn't his wife any more; they're Indian divorced; he's telling Dad he wants me!"

"No! Isn't Sheriff Beck looking for Jed?"

"Nobody's dared get word to Beck, I reckon. Know Jed'd look 'em up and kill 'em. If Beck knew Jed was there, he'd sure ride up to Elk River."

"I'll bet on that—but what's this about his marrying you?"

"Dad's even coaxing me—Jed's holding something over him, I guess."

Tuck thought of the slain salesman. Then he cried roughly, "I'll ride up there and kill Jed myself before I let him have you."

"But Beck's got a warrant to serve on you, too, Tuck!"

"What'd one more charge amount to, then?"

"I can hold off Dad—and Jed," said Jennie, throwing back her head. She looked at her gunbelt hung on the wall by his.

Tuck looked at her there, slender, a bit pale and sleepy, definitely a woman even in her cowboy garb. "You won't have to." Later, as they talked, he told her about striking the silver vein on the cliff wall of Black Mountain, sealing the mining rights to Dobbs' company.

Jennie's eyes sparkled. "I'm glad for you! Now you can get a good lawyer, give yourself up to Beck!"

"That's what Dobbs told me," Tuck commented wryly.

Soon Tuck was boiling bedlothing and bed garments again. Then he helped swamp out the Reese cabin. That night he insisted Jennie sleep first, and he nursed the family. She woke around midnight, though, and against his remonstrances, finished the night caring for the patients.

Next morning, the family all seemed improved further; their broth was strengthened, as Dr. Kincaid had suggested. Jennie said to Tuck, "Why don't you bring in some fresh meat? The venison's about gone."

Tuck smiled. "I take it you don't need me around for a while." He went out to the livery stable roan, geared, and railed down river, looking for game signs.

Despite his best efforts, he was gone longer than he planned. By the time he finally got a big elk, gutted it,

loaded it on the roan, and got it back to the cabin, it was afternoon. He immediately noted the doctor's mustard-colored bronco grazing in the long grass near the cabin. He never thought to look for Jennie's buckskin, but went on into the cabin.

Dr. Kincaid was sitting on a cracked box by the bunk on which stretched his two adult patients, both now rational but weak. The doctor looked up when Tuck entered. Tuck said, "Jennie's here. She sent me after fresh meat. I've got an elk outside, across that livery roan."

Dr. Kincaid rose, suggested they go outside, and Tuck followed him there. "I didn't want to upset the patients," the doctor said, "they're doing so well. But shortly after I got here, Jed Wolf rode up, mean mad, and insisted Jennie return home to Elk River. I think he'd have injured her if she hadn't gone with him; he's a bad hombre, and he had the drop, so to speak. She and I talked to him outside here; I'm no fighting man. I did have a rifle in my saddle sheath; and Reese's rifle was inside. She rode back with him, to save bad trouble, I reckon. She never mentioned to Jed you were here."

Tuck stood very still, thinking. Then he said, "Doc, I'll have to ride and help her."

Dr. Kincaid shook his head. "I hope you'll wait, Wilds. I'm due to return to a ranch case on the Yampa River, much as I'd like to stay. The family here is improved; but it'll be another two days before they can

safely see to themselves. Maybe I can ride back before then. I'd like you to stay, nurse them till then. They could have a relapse, you know," he added.

Tuck groaned.

"Jennie's Dad, Ab, is on Elk River; she'll not be harmed at home. I'd suggest you wait till the Fourth of July celebration in Ute Ford—every man possible comes to it, you know: The Reese family will be on their feet then; the Myers place will be literally deserted that day. Jennie can't attend the Fourth celebration, due to the drunks in town; if you want to help her then, go to Elk River that day. You can pick her up without trouble; and, I reckon, knowing you, you can take over from there."

Tuck gulped. "Doc, I'll do that."

"Good!"

As Dr. Kincaid predicted, the Reese parents and children were able to be up and about early on the third of July, the doctor returned. As he and Tuck stood alone outside the Reese cabin, talking, he held about a shooting affair on Elk River.

"It was Jed Wolf prodded this fight," Dr. Kincaid said. "I can't help thinking it won't be long before somebody tips off Sheriff Beck he's in the area. This kid shot was hardly past the tenderfoot stage. He'll live; only he's lost a lot of blood. All I reckon Wolf had against him was the kid wouldn't line up with him on something."

"Is Jed the Myers foreman now?" Tuck wondered.

"He is." The doctor nodded. "Running all Myers' ranching and drives. Myers, from what I hear, is staying at his saloon on the east side of the Elk River bridge, afraid to stick his head even in his own bunkhouse just up river."

"Is Jennie home?"

"She is, but except when Ab's got her swamping his

saloon, he keeps her locked in the home cabin."

"No!"

"Sorry I'm the one to let you know, Tuck. However, the girl isn't being hurt physically, only she's not allowed to ride. Maybe, I reckon, Myers guesses she'd ride to you."

"After you look over the family," Tuck asked, a flush warming his face, "when're you riding out?"

"Later," said Dr. Kincaid. "I'm tired. But I expect you'll be leaving pronto. You're following my advice about the Fourth?"

"I am, Doc. I'm getting that girl away before Jed—"

Dr. Kincaid said, raising a hand, "Don't tell me. But remember, Jed's good with knife and gun."

As the Reese family weakly began to come outside, the conversation was halted. A few minutes later the members of the household were crying and saying their thanks as Tuck climbed on the livery stable roan to leave them. Their gratitude made a lump in his throat. But he shook it off, worrying about Jennie.

It was out of the way to go through Ute Ford, but he knew he had the time to exchange horses there; for the Myers riders would not leave their bunkhouse until daybreak of the Fourth to ride in the Ute Ford Fourth of July celebration.

In the late afternoon Tuck rode down off an oak ridge toward Ute Ford; the town was quiet by the river, though resting up for the hectic activities of the next

day. Through the deserted street the roan plodded wearily, and showed interest only when Tuck turned him toward the livery stable. After throwing his saddle on the bay, now rested, Tuck knew he should be riding out, not lingering around to be recognized. But he was in a sour mood, hungry for someone else's cooking, and he rode down to the restaurant of Mrs. Kelly's hotel, tied up, went inside, and ordered himself steak and potatoes. Mrs. Kelly was not in sight. An elderly, unknown waitress-cook seemed to consider Tuck only a stranger.

Later, night fell as he rode on. The moon came out, giving enough light for the bay to pick out the trail easily.

After midnight he drew off the trail just west of the board bridge across the Elk River. Where cottonwood, oak, and aspen rustled overhead, he stopped, ungreased the bay and, taking his blanket, rolled up to sleep till dawn.

As birds in the trees about began to welcome the cool dawn, Tuck stirred, threw off his blanket and arose. By moving only a few feet, he could look out on the Elk River bridge. Beyond it, the saloon remained quiet, closed; from the near Myers cabin arose a blue spiral of wood smoke, he surmised, Jennie was up, preparing breakfast for her father.

Tuck squatted on his heels, watching the Myers buildings by the river, wondering what the day would bring. He could not see the Myers bunkhouse, up-river over a prairie hill; but in less than an hour along the trail by

the river came a group of riders, scattered, but still a group. Ab Myers saw them, too; and Tuck saw him stolidly leave the front door of the cabin, chain it, go to the padlocked door of the saloon, unfasten it and go inside.

Tuck counted fourteen riders who dismounted and entered Myers' saloon.

Herdly half an hour passed before the riders began to saunter from the saloon in thick clusters. By their walk, Tuck could tell they were already half drunk. He saw the flash of several bottles held to lips, cached in pockets and saddlebags. The horsemen would probably be well liquored even before reaching Ute Ford for the celebration, a wild one, as he knew.

Soon the horses were clattering over the planks of the bridge, heading on the trail for Tin Cup. After the last horseman left the saloon, the last bronco was spurred across the bridge, Tuck sighed, relieved; he had picked out Jed's big figure.

The bulky figure of Al Myers came outside his saloon and stood looking wistfully after the party. Tuck guessed Myers planned to keep his saloon open, in case other riders dropped past for a bottle or drinks to help them on the way to town.

Tuck would have to face Myers, but he resolved to try to keep their meeting peaceful.

After due time, during which Ab Myers returned to his saloon, Tuck saddled up and rode down from the

tumber to cross the bridge. He had not brought Jennie a horse, at back of the cabin, in the corral, running to the river, was Jennie's buckskin and another horse, undoubtedly Al's. As the short hooves of his bay clattered across the wooden bridge, Ab Myers heard or saw him, the man did not appear.

As Tuck neared the Myers cabin, he saw the front door was shut and chained, despite the rising heat. Sighing, Tuck rode on to the saloon ten rack, dismounted, and went through the open doorway into the saloon.

Ab Myers, sipping a cold cup of coffee with whiskey, sat on a high, cool, bark of the rickety bar, and did not give Tuck a glance till he stopped. Then Myers reached fast for the sawed-off shotgun under the bar, but froze when Tuck slid out his Colt, covering a slit of hairy, sun-scarred belly where Al's shirt front gaped open.

"Just pour a stout glass for me," Tuck said gently. "And don't move suddenly."

"Let me see your money?" grumbled Myers.

With his left hand, Tuck reached in a jeans pocket, then produced a coin.

Ab poured a drink.

Not touching the whiskey yet, not taking his gun or eyes from Jennie's father, Tuck said, "Now I'd like the key to that lock keeping Jennie in the cabin."

"She can get out any time she likes," said Ab, not moving. "She can bust a window."

"But you'd hear that," Tuck commented dryly. "The

key. I don't want to have to buffalo you and take it."

Sorly Al Myers brought out a key and slapped it on the bar, shaking Tuck's shot glass. Myers seemed personally unarmed, the only weapon Tuck could see was the shotgun protruding from under the bar. Pocketing the key, holstering his pistol, Tuck reached over, caught the saloon gun and, after breaking it and verifying it had a shell, slid it down the bar near the floor.

"Jennie and I are riding out," Tuck said, "if she'll ride with me. A fine girl like her shouldn't be kept locked up."

"Jed Wolf is fixing to marry up with her," said Al Myers suddenly. "He'll follow the two of you—and kill you. You take her, we'll kill her likely."

"I'll him try. I hope he's better at bushwhacking than the last time he tried it on me."

With odd eyes Myers watched Tuck empty the shot glass, back to the doorway, pick up the shotgun, and continue backing till outside. Tuck's last glance showed Myers still on the stool—unmoving.

Tuck rolled his bay and led him to the front of Myers' room, where he tied him to a post, then unlocked the padlock on the chained door. He knocked last of all.

There was a silence, then Jennie said low, "Come in."

Tuck stepped into the calm interior, gloomy after the bright July sun outdoors. Hesitating, leaning the shotgun against the inside of the jamb, he saw Jennie, in cowboy jeans and cotton shirt as usual, but barefooted,

her eyes blinking. Then she rushed to him. As he held her, she began sobbing on his chest, shaken with the violence of her emotion.

Tuck began to stroke her hair. "Now it's all over," he consoled her. "We'll ride out of here, and you can forget it."

Jennie quieted to say. "It's the way Dad knuckled under to Jed, after the way Jed mistreated Sis, nearly killed her. Dad's talking of me marrying Jed, with him still Sis' husband—Indian divorce! Dad's said he's keeping me locked up till I agree to marry him."

"I told your dad about us. He's sitting in the saloon, quiet as a lamb. But it may not last. Get on your boots; we'll skedaddle. I'd like to bring along your buckskin; otherwise we'll be riding double."

Jennie wiped her eyes and blew her nose on his handkerchief. "Saddle up for me! My gear's on a corral pole, rope and all. I had no heart to run away even till you came in the door. Now I'm ready."

"Good." Tuck felt this was a dream, too good to be true.

He turned and went outside, around the cabin to the corral. Finding a rope, he looped the buckskin, leaving only the iron gray horse he guessed Ab Myers used. When the gear was on, he led the buckskin out of the corral in front of the cabin.

Jennie, wearing a waist gun and carrying a sheathed saddle carbine, came out. Tuck stole a kiss, then helped

her on the buckskin. He stepped up on the bay, feeling good, looked again at Jennie and saw her staring at the saloon front. "I hope Dad will come out," she said, "to wish us well. But I guess he won't."

"In time, he'll see things our way."

"Sure," Jennie nodded unhappily. Then, beginning to cry again, she kicked the buckskin, heading west for the wooden bridge. Tuck prodded the bay behind.

In the concealment of the grove, Jennie suddenly reined up.

"Tuck," she said low, when he rode beside her, "I can't leave Dad alone to face Jed Wolf. I just don't know how Jed'll treat him—beat him up or something, I reckon. I want to stay close and help Dad; he's getting old."

He told her how he had watched the buildings that morning from the timber. "We can hide here," he added. "If we have to run later, the horses will be fresh. We can see everything goes on there. If my guns are needed—"

"Ours!" Jennie amended, her chin raising. Then: Let's stay. The hands'll be riding in before morning. Dad has a horse herd up-river ready to start driving to Ta.; it's planned to start it on the trail at dawn."

Dismounting, they led the horses into the depths of the wooded area, where the animals were ungared, picketed; then the two stretched side by side on a look-out spot, watching the peaceful Elk River meander down across the prairie.

After midnight, Tuck roused, hearing the first of the returning Myers riders. The horsemen continued coming noisily toward the Elk River bridge, their yells and drunken shouts stirring the coyotes who had been sounding off now and again. As the first horses struck the planks of the wooden bridge, creating a din in the quiet, moonlit night, Jennie rose from her blanket and joined Tuck, staring down at the trail.

Evidently Ab Myers wanted to see the riders coming, for Tuck saw a lighted kerosene lantern bob out of the cabin residence and stop, waiting. Beside him, Jennie said, "Dad's giving last-minute instructions about driving the herd to Utah, I guess."

Tuck found out later that she was right. After that, Ab said: "Jed, Tuck Wilds came by, and carried off Jennie at gun point."

Jed, who had been reeling in his saddle from drunkenness, seemed to sober at this news. "She fought against it about as hard as you, I reckon, Ab?"

Startlingly, Ab Myers said, "If she wants to live with Wilds rather than you, she's got a mind of her own, being my daughter, and will; and I'll not interfere further."

Jed cursed then; he drew fast and, without warning, in the moonlight and the lantern rays, shot Ab. Jennie's father, unarmed, fell back on the earth, dropping the kerosene lantern, which did not go out; only lay there on its side, dimly lighting the nearness. Then Jed fired four more bullets into Ab's body. He only stopped when

his pistol clicked on the empty chamber he carried.

The other Myers riders, had they been common cowhands, would have been shocked at this; but these men, long regarded as horse thieves, did nothing but watch Jed spur his pony for the saloon.

"I'm taking over this place!" Jed cried. "The liquor in the saloon is ours for the taking! Let's load up with it; then we'll have something to drink driving the horses to Utah!"

Jennie and Tuck, watching, knew something was wrong when gunfire flashed; then they saw the bobbing lantern being carried by a horseman; could tell the riders went into the saloon. In a short time the lantern light disappeared. A red-white glow showed in the saloon, and Jennie touched Tuck's arm, her hand trembling.

"I'm rid n' down!" she said. "Dad's in trouble."

"Wait. I'll find out for you."

But she saddled up with him. Together, they spurred down for the bridge. The Myers riders were all out of sight now, racing up the river trail, cut off from sound and hearing by the hill.

The saloon was all ablaze inside, the livid flames licking out the door and windows.

Tuck spurred ahead across the bridge. The area about the burning building became as light as day as Tuck pulled up.

"Dad! Dad!" cried Jennie; her buckskin skidded to a halt beside Tuck's bay.

By the light from the burning saloon, Tuck could see the blood on the earth where the gunfire had blazed. He saw a body had been dragged toward the saloon. He walked the bay along the sign. Finally he stopped, held back by the blasting heat of the burning saloon, in which bottled stock was breaking and, in turn, adding to the fury of the fire.

Jennie, afoot, darted by Tuck; and he feared she would rush into the building. "Dad's in there!" she cried.

Tuck slid to the earth and caught her. "Yes! But he's beyond help!"

Jenni sobbed uncontrollably in his arms. As the heat of the burning saloon reached out, he led her back to safety.

Very pale-faced, Jennie rode up the river trail with Tuck in the morning. Seeing the horse herd was gone, the two came down on the Myers bunkhouse cautiously. After observation, noting the wood fire in the bunkhouse was dead, Tuck rode in and found the place deserted. Evidently even the cook had taken off; no riders were left. Whether or not Jed knew this Tuck did not even attempt to hazard.

Instead, he waved Jennie into the bunkhouse. He then rebuilt the cook fire, made them coffee, and tried to get the girl to eat a bit. But she refused. There still remained some food stock in the cook's lockers; Tuck filled the saddlebags, and without comment, the two set off on the road trail left by the herd.

"What do you plan?" asked Jennie that afternoon, for the first time curious as the two swung from the horse herd tracks to a game trail winding through the green, wooded hills southwest of the Yampa River.

"Jed'll stop at my ranch they're using for a way

station on Yellow Creek," Tuck said. "If we get there first, I want to take care of Pepper Click. Then we'll get ready for them."

Jennie looked at him, her eyes dark. "There are fourteen of them."

"If we let Pepper join them, that'll be fifteen."

"Oh!" Jennie said, then was quiet.

They rode through timber, hitting the trail along White River near dark. In a grassy park above the clear water of the upper stream, they stopped, hobbled the horses to feed in long grass, and made a late campfire.

"I still don't know what you plan," Jennie said, having eaten some flapjacks Tuck made, praised his coffee, and acted more alive than at any time since her father's death.

He told her about Pepper Click dynamiting the XTW ranch house. "He may have some sticks of the stuff about yet, in his camp in some park near my home place. If not, I owe him something anyway."

Jennie smiled wanly, the first time all day. "I'm riding with you."

While the fire died down, she rolled in her blanket and dropped to sleep almost immediately, exhausted by the excitement followed by the long ride. Tuck was awake early, starting coffee, but Jennie, more herself, heard him, crawled out of her blanket, and insisted on being the breakfast cook.

Shortly they were winding along the riverbank trail, bypassing the Reese place; for Tuck did not want that

family in on this affair. The Reese household had had enough troubles of their own lately. Knowing the two were in the area, they might inadvertently give them away to Jed Wolf or one of his riders.

The day was hot, the alkali plain a glaring land, with undulating waves of heated air. Tuck hardly realized how he had pushed Jennie and the horses till they rode into Yellow Creek, splashing water over themselves and the animals.

Though not far from the ranch-stead he considered his, he dared build a fire in the dusk. Seeing Jennie so worn and tired, he refused to let her make the coffee or meal, insisting she rest as he cooked. The coffee, bacon and beans refreshed them, and they rolled in blankets in a nearby secluded park. Tuck did not sleep as he pretended, but kept watch awhile. Eventually, feeling safe, he let the murmur of the water in the stream lull him also to sleep.

In the morning over coffee, Tuck said, "Jennie, you stay here, rest; I'll look up my friend Click's camp."

But Jennie shook her head. "We go together. Pepper's the same kind of friend a rattlesnake is, I don't want him finding me alone—or killing you, leaving me."

Tuck remembered that he thought the dynamiting Click (for he was sure Click was the man) had ridden south of his buildings, up into some park among the higher mesures, after the explosion. Thus Jennie and he rode on their cautious reconnoitering upstream to higher land.

All day they searched carefully but futilely; about to give up for the day, Tuck stood up in his stirrups, studying the horizon. In the high sunset sky a few miles beyond trickled a wisp of blue smoke.

"Mr. Click!" Tuck exclaimed, believing they had found him.

"I hope," said Jennie.

With renewed energy, the two pushed their horses on toward the park from which the tell-tale smoke had trickled. In the early dusk, Tuck, reining up, signaled the girl to hold both mounts, slid to earth and began to talk forward, rifle in hand.

Soon he halted, staring down before him. S.C. Pepper Click, very boldly camped under a cottonwood, was squatting by his fire, now holding only a coffeepot. Click's horse was grazing some twenty feet away. The scene was peaceful, and Tuck would have suspected a trap, only there was no place for ambushers to hide that he could spot.

He stole downward toward the unsuspecting Click.

"Git 'em up, Pepper!"

Pepper Click remained squatting, but dropped his tin cup of coffee and shot his hands up.

Before Tuck could call for Jennie, she began riding down the descent into the park, leading his horse. She halted, keeping the horses behind him.

"Now," Tuck said, "slowly, Pepper. Unbuckle your gunbelt—step away."

Tuck half expected to see Click's right arm sweep to his holster; but instead the dynamiter unhitched his waist gunbelt, stood up and cautiously took several steps forward, his back still to Tuck, arms up.

"That looks good, Tuck said. "But keep 'em high."

Walking close while covering the other, Tuck checked his captive with his left hand, to assure himself Pepper carried no hide-out, either big gun, derringer, or knife.

Jennie, still mounted, walked the horses near. "Tuck," she spoke low, "there's another rider coming. He's seen Pepper's smoke, too. Or this is a meeting!"

Tuck asked Click, "You expecting someone?"

Pepper shrugged. "Me? Nope." He knew better than to lower his arms.

Jennie continued, "The rider coming—he's a townsman—store clothes."

Tuck bent, picked up Click's gunbelt, pulled out the Colt, stuck it in his waistband and handed the belt back to Click. "Buckle it back."

Click obeyed.

"Leave the hands down," Tuck added to Jennie: "Join us. We'll all be drinking coffee, peaceful friends, when we get company."

The townsman appeared far across the park, his horse walking in the belly-high grass. The three squatting here from the campfire, each with a coffee cup, seemed to ignore the arrival. Yet from under Tuck's hat brim, he studied the black-suited man nearing in the dusk, even

as he kept a wary eye on Click.

Jennie whispered suddenly, "It's Harrington, the Denver lawyer. He's the one told Dad originally the homestead papers weren't filed on your ranch."

"Ah," Tuck growled.

Across the fire from Tuck and Jennie, Pepper Click's face was pale.

"H., the campfire!" called Harrington. Thin, clean-shaven, dressed in such a manner his fancy vest showed, the lawyer's voice was couched in a friendly greeting.

Jennie stood up.

Harrington immediately touched his right hand to his hat. "Miss Myers! A pleasure."

Tuck noted Harrington's only apparent weapon seemed to be a carbine thrust in his saddle boot.

"Light; have some A.buckle." Jennie spoke easily, nodding at the blackened pot on the fire.

Harrington reined up and dismounted stiffly; tying his saddle horse to a near sapling, he left the carbine and walked forward to the fire. Tuck watched narrowly while wondering if Harrington was as unfamiliar with the cow country as he appeared.

Suddenly Tuck stood up, twisting toward Harrington, his pistol covering the lawyer, ready as well to swing onto Pepper Click. "Git 'em up, Mr. Harrington."

Startled, Harrington hesitated, then thrust his arms up awkwardly. "I don't understand—"

Pepper Click said ironically, "Tuck Wilds."

"Ah!" Harrington's breath exhaled; then he glared at Jennie, blaming her for letting him walk into this.

"Jed Wolf just killed Ab, Jennie's father; burned him in his saloon," Tuck said tightly. "Jennie's riding with me now."

Harrington seemed to shrink as Tuck stepped close, searched with his left hand for a hold-out weapon, then moved away.

"What could you want with me?" Harrington asked in a shaky voice. "My arms—this holding them up is tiring."

"A few minutes," Tuck said, "then you can lower them to do some writing." He added: "Jennie, see if our lawyer isn't carrying some writing material in his saddlebags."

Jennie moved to the lawyer's saddle horse and, quieting it, pulled off the saddlebags and returned to the fire. Soon she had found a pen, ink, and some legal size paper.

"Now, Mr. Harrington," Tuck said, "you can put down your hands. I want you here by the fire, where you can see good"—the dusk was deepening—"only be careful to stay away from our friend Click."

Pepper Click, from where he hunkered by the fire, almost fell backward a moment later as Tuck pulled out a silver dollar and flipped it down to him; but after watching it, Click steadied himself under the pistol Tuck swung his way.

"Write out a paper, Mr. Harrington," Tuck said—

"an option relinquishing S.C. Click's homestead rights on the Yellow Creek ranch to me, for one dollar and considerations. He'll sign it, I'm sure."

Mr. Harrington, his pen hand trembling, sat flat on the grassy earth by the fire and began to write. The scratching of the pen was long in the silence.

Pepper Click cleared his throat. "I take it the considerations are that Mr. Harrington and I live?"

"That's right," Tuck agreed, "but only if you stay out of my sight after this."

The lawyer straightened his back, sighing. "I'm done. But what if Jed Wolf refuses to comply?"

"I'll take care of that," Tuck said laconically. He nodded at Jennie; she assumed guarding the two captives while he studied the handwritten document. Satisfied, he took the pen and gave it to Pepper Click with the paper. "I noted your signature at the land office," he said. "Make this one the same. I'm sure you want everything to remain peaceful."

Pepper put down "S.C. Click," as Tuck remembered it from the land office; then Jennie signed as one witness, the lawyer as the second. Tuck folded the document and thrust it temporarily in his shirt.

"Now," he said, "Mes Myers and I are riding out. I advise you two to follow suit, soon as we're out of sight and hearing; but don't contact Jed or any of his drovers. If you do, I'll know in due time. I'll be mad."

"Our guns?" asked Pepper Click.

"Your dynamite that's left first."

Pepper Click shivered. He knew Tuck was onto his attempt to blast him into the next world. "I used it all."

Studying the shaken man, Tuck believed him. He remembered a big, dying cottonwood a mile down river. He told them its location. "I'll leave your guns there, all of 'em. But if you attempt trailing us—your considerations are paid for."

The lawyer, Harrington, flinched.

"Let's go, Jennie."

Pistol in hand, Tuck waited till Jennie moved to her buckskin, mounted, and then led up his bay. When he had pulled out Harrington's saddle carbine and Click's rifle, he handed them to her, then waved her ahead. Shortly he stepped on his bay and spurred out into the gathering darkness, heading for Scotty's place.

Next afternoon, the dust cloud Jed Wolf's riders and the horse herd from Elk River stirred up crossing the last stretch of the arid desert to Hell Ranch indicated an intention to camp there on the river for the night. Scotty and Tuck Wilks, each armed and watchful, could not keep the information of what they planned from Jennie; and they did not try. While Scotty's two squaws gathered their brood into the hot log cabin for protection, taking along guns and ammunition enough for a siege, Jennie, wearing a waist gun, came to the saloon and insisted on staying there with Scotty and Tuck.

"All right, Miss Jennie," sighed Scotty finally, spreading his hands, "only you stay in the background. If guns start popping, dart into the back room, so you'll be safe."

Tuck saw Jennie's lips tighten. He had a sinking feeling she would not seek cover, no matter what.

Thus she was in the back of the room when, after the horse herd was noisily driven past to the river near the corral, Jed Wolf, followed by Wyoming, Dutch and two riders Tuck did not know, shouldered through the doorway of the store and glanced down at the end of the bar where he stood. Then, seeing Tuck received them without any aggressive move, the five bellied up to the bar, Jed just around the plank corner from Tuck.

"What'll it be, gents?" asked Scotty, behind the bar ready to serve.

"What your friend's got," said Jed cockily. He nodded at Tuck's glass.

"That Scotch comes higher," said Scotty, shrugging, reaching under the bar, then pouring.

"Always thought you held out the best liquor on me, Scotty." From Jed's face one would think he recalled any unpleasantness between them.

The four lined at the bar with Jed grinned, as if he had pulled a fast move. They took Scotch, too. Then Jed reached out, caught the bottle and put it by the glasses. "Leave it," he said. "We'll pay extra."

Scotty shrugged. "You're the customers," Then he added, "You picked a dangerous time to drive into Utah."

Jed Wolf wiped the back of his hand across his pursed lips and filled his glass again. "How's that, Scotty?" The big dark breed's eyes ranged to Tuck.

"A yellow-legs just passed through under orders, warning everybody along the river to get out. Seems two

blue-coat companies from down south are chasing Utes who've skipped the reservation there; headed this way on the war path, it's sad."

Jed Wolf started. His half Indian blood not being Ute, he knew the danger instantly to himself, his men and his herd. "Suppose you'll stay here?"

"But only because my wives are Utes; I'll be safe! I was telling Tuck and Jennie here they'd better highlight it out fast."

Jed Wolf addressed Tuck directly. "What you intend doing, Wilds?"

"Before I leave," Tuck said, "I wanted to talk to you about this horse herd. It's Myers property; that means it belongs to Jennie and her sister now."

Jed Wolf grumaced, his teeth showing. "Myers told me to ramrod these ponies to Utah and sell 'em."

Tuck said, "That was before you killed him."

His face darkening, Jed blasted out, "I'll kill ye!" and his right hand flashed for his gun.

Tuck sprang around the corner of the plank bar, his left hand going out to catch Jed's gun wrist, his right going down for his own six-gun. Jed's free hand clinched Tuck's right, holding Tuck's gun in the holster.

Inches from the planking, the two struggled against each other, chest to chest, each trying to keep the other's gun from clearing leather, while trying to pull his own gun.

Despite Tuck's grip, Wolf slid his gun just free of the holster and fired. Tuck heard Scotty squeal and knew

the shot had struck him.

While Tuck tried to keep the muzzle away from his vitals, Wolf pulled his trigger a second time. The hot lead stabbed Tuck's thigh shockingly.

As Wolf and Tuck struggled together to ward off each other's muzzles, Scotty, down on the floor behind the bar, screamed in Ute. One of the two unknown cowboys, Tuck learned later, cleared his six-gun. Tuck heard the blast of the pistol from the back of the room. Jennie was in the fight to keep it even between Jed and Tuck.

Jed squeezed another shot; and though Tuck had depressed the other's gun with his thrusting arm, the slug burned along the calf of his left leg. Tuck staggered.

Wyoming and Dutch, the third rider, instead of going for guns, realizing the danger from either Wolf's gun, Tuck's (if he got it drawn), or Jennie's, bolted for the open store doorway.

As the three riders spewed through the doorway, Jed and Tuck clinched each other; but both heard the rifle outside. A fleeing rider screamed. Both realized one of Scotty's squaws had fired, downing one of the gang.

Wolf, feeling Tuck weaken, pulled a fourth shot, then a fifth. Weakness caught Tuck, though both of the last shots missed him. He clutched Jed now to stand erect.

Jed shook Tuck's slackening arms free and stepped back. Deliberately, the big 'breed raised his gun, aiming at Tuck's breast. His teeth grimacing, Jed Wolf fired at point-blank range. But the gun clicked futilely, the

hammer over an empty chamber.

Tuck could see Jed twist and bound for the doorway, grabbing Jennie from behind with his left arm as he did so. Tuck, however, even as his own gun slid out, felt himself falling.

He heard Jennie scream; then he struck the board floor, and black oblivion settled on him.

Tuck came to consciousness with the realization that both squaws were pulling Scotty from behind the bar alongside him, near a barrel of sugar. Scotty's children, now running excitedly into the building, headed by Dan, the eight-year-old boy, were calling in both Ute and English as to what to do.

The squaws quieted the chaos fast; At Scotty's order, Queen staunched Tuck's wounds, Silverheels his own bleeding stomach. Dan, his dark face eager, in colorful garb, with bracelet, beadwork and feather, meanwhile told his father how the squaws and the older children, firing rifles after the outbreak of gunfire in the store, had forced the horse-drover gang, except for the two dead, to leave the immediate vicinity of the post. However, they had taken with them the horse herd and Jennie Myers.

Hearing this, Tuck groaned, and tried to sit up, but the squaw Queen pushed him down. "I've got to get Jennie," Tuck remonstrated.

Scotty whispered, "It must wait. You're too shot up." Shortly he added: "I'll have to send Dan for help. There

was a Ute hunting party went up-river only a couple of days ago."

First noting how weak his voice was, Tuck said, "Dr. Kincaid'll help." Then: "Reckon he'll come down-river while this Ute war scare in on?"

"Doc'll come." Scotty turned his head. "Dan, ride to tell Doc; then trail down the hunters; get them here to help."

"If these hunters hear fellow Utes are on the warpath, won't they start raising trouble, also?"

"Possibly," Scotty admitted. "But considering I know most every Ute that ever came up this way, and I'm related to no small number through my wives, I'll soon have the army calling on me to settle this break from the reservation anyway, should I live that long."

"You'll live." Then: "Reckon these outlaws'll let Dan ride out of here? Jed Wolf'll have men watching for that."

"Dan'll get outside," said Scotty, pride in this voice. To the eight-year-old boy, father added, "But don't take any chances, Son! Only remember, Dan, if you don't go through, you'll be an orphan boy."

Dan, standing straight, said, "I'll take Wind, the fastest pony. It'll soon be dark outside. Nobody'll out here 'll know I've gone."

"Good." The storekeeper lay back, his head against the sugar barrel, his hand near the bloody bandage at his waist.

As the boy left the building, Scotty began to order the windows watched, the door barred, "That Jed may come back," he said. He'll guess we're pretty weak; maybe they'll think it best to wipe us out before they drive ahead."

The two squaws moved to see about the fortifying of the store, but returned soon to lay rifles and reloaded six-guns, plus extra ammunition, by Scotty and Tuck. Tuck felt so weak he wondered if he could even level a gun.

Soon the squaw Silverheels, a broad, heavy-set woman, muscled like a wrestler, shifted Scotty and Tuck onto cots just feet apart, where she could care for their wants by sitting between them. Queen, rifle in hand, knelt on guard by a near window. Tuck felt strangely out of place, to be lying wounded there among the trade goods, the gaming tables, the bar with its bottles.

As full darkness came, all assumed Dan had gotten away unseen. But no kerosene lamp was lit in the store. The older children, with rifles or six-guns too big for them, began to watch out the night with the squaws; the younger of the brood slept.

The evening of the second day after the shooting, roused by the excited voices of the squaws and the children underfoot (excluding the papoose), Tuck saw Dr. Kincaid, dusty, worn, and stumbling with fatigue, steady himself at the doorway.

"Wave the flies out," grumbled the doctor. "Get that kerosene lamp lit."

Scotty began weeping. "Doc," he moaned, "this pain—if you can't help me, shoot me."

Dr. Kincaid, resting his bag on a game table, opened it, and having downed a shot glass Silverheels brought him filled a hypodermic with morphia, and turned to Scotty first.

"A few weeks," the doctor said, "you'll likely be griping to the whole river valley about my bill, which I include one pony I sure think I ruined."

Scotty yelled at the needle jab, then soon lapsed into a stupor.

Dr. Kincaid, nodding at Queen, said, "Leave out that bottle of Scotch to prod me a-working." Next, he smiled at Tuck sardonically and, having sterilized the needle, filled it again.

"A cowboy on the river," the doctor said wryly, "tells me the Utes are off the reservation, coming up-river. I'm surprised they're not here yet."

"Rumor has two companies of regulars trailing them," Tuck grunted. "Maybe they've stopped the exodus."

"That could be," said Dr. Kincaid soberly. He held the hypodermic up, scrutinizing it intently, then, with a quick strike, was shooting morphia in Tuck.

"That a wild bronco disables a cowboy trying to peel him, I understand," said Dr. Kincaid, "but two grown-up men getting in a shoot-'em-up at close range—" The

doctor shrugged.

The last Tuck could remember that night was Dr. Kincaid saying, "Any venison, sage hen, or mountain trout around, I can eat, even if these patients can't."

The doctor knew Scotty lived well.

Dr. Kincaid had hardly ridden out across the desert in the early morning, headed for Yellow Creek on the way to Ute Ford, when one of Scotty's children, a small girl, came running in the store, excitedly talking in Ute.

"Slow her up," Tuck said, unhappily sitting up on the cot. "I can't get Ute that fast."

"An old Mormon in a wagon," interpreted Scotty. "He's come up the river from the settlement there with a load of oats. Likely wants to sell the load and knows I'll buy. But the stuff's got to be ferried across."

"You can't tell it," Tuck said, "but I'm up to it."

Scotty remained stretched out. "My squaws can do it; they do all the time."

Tuck began dressing slowly, however. "I've been in bed long enough. I can at least walk to the river; see if this Mormon has any news."

Scotty said shrewdly, "You're wanting to find out news about Jennie Myers."

Tuck stamped into his boots and up. "That's right,"

he agreed, buckling on his gunbelt, then walking slowly outside.

Down by the ferry scow, the two squaws waited for Tuck before starting across the muddy river. He found the Mormon to be an elderly, heavily bearded farmer, eager only to get this loaded wagon and two nervous horses ferried onto the Hell Ranch side of the river. After getting there, the old man answered Tuck's question about whether he had seen Jed Wolf, his riders, and a girl prisoner.

"Seed that bunch yistiddy." From the high wagon seat the farmer quieted his team. "They passed me, heading up-river." The bearded Mormon studied the buildings ahead. "I heard one of 'em griping about this place. Another mentioned Yellow Creek, a breaking corral."

"My place," Tuck commented. "The girl—?"

"There ware a gal with the bunch; but she weren't tied like a prisoner. Yet she coulda been. Men ware all about," the bearded Mormon added sagely.

As the wagon pulled toward the store, Tuck turned to Scotty's corral, where his bay was.

The Mormon went into the store to dicker with Scotty. He was unloading the oats when Tuck, armed, provisioned, and with water, stopped the bay, dismounted gingerly, and went in to see Scotty before leaving. Handing Scotty the paper Click had signed, Tuck said, "Keep this—in case I get in their hands."

Scotty sat up on the cot, sweat beading his forehead. "Tuck, don't be a fool! Your strength's not returned enough—"

"I'll be riding—"

"Wait till I can go with you—these Utes Dan's looking for come."

"I can't, Jennie—" Tuck's voice broke. He twisted and went outside.

He rode east across the desert. Scotty managed to rise and walk to the doorway; he leaned weakly against the door jamb long as Tuck could see.

The bay fresh under him, Tuck got across the hot, arid alkali stretch to Yellow Creek in good time. When he rode the bronco into the creek, splashing water over the two of them, he began feeling weakened by the ride, however. Yet he put the bay along a creek path toward the breaking corral; he could not stop. Only as he rode on toward the breaking corral, a piece from his burned out ranch house, did he slow up and begin to observe as carefully as possible.

Riding down a hill less than a mile from the corral, he first heard the bawling of cows, the yells of men, and caught the smell of burnt hide carried along on the urgent air. Jed Wolf was rounding up Tuck's stock, branding, probably figuring on driving over to the Utah settlements to sell to some unscrupulous buyer.

Tuck could now see men by the corral, cutting, roping, and branding. That he was probably out-numbered about

fourteen to one was a thought he dismissed as he walked the bay forward.

Ahead, someone called, straightening up from the small fire on which the irons were being heated. Riders and men afoot turned to gawk at Tuck. One saw him sway in the saddle, he guessed, for he heard a laugh. Now the men about the breaking corral were amused.

Suddenly, under a creek-bank cottonwood, Tuck saw a slender form with Indian braids jump up and start running toward him, crying, "Ride out!" It was Jennie, her hands and feet now untied, but her gunbelt missing; and Tuck knew she was still a prisoner.

He whirled the tired bay then, spurring to ride out.

The bay, already pushed hard, chose that minute to stumble. For a brief time Tuck thought he was going to be afoot, even pulled his boots free of the stirrups. While the bay fought to get four feet under him, a rider, coming from behind Tuck, began swinging a loop.

Tuck attempted to swerve the bay by knee and left hand; reached for his holstered gun; then the rope settled over him. His arms pinned at his sides, he was helpless. The next instant, his boots still out of the stirrups, he felt himself yanked from the saddle, falling on the dusty earth. The bay, scared, bolted down the back trail.

The jolt of landing shook Tuck, but no more than the shrieking laughter of the outlaws. Before he could rise, the tight rope holding him helpless, dallied on the saddle horn of the rider who had captured him, dragged him as

that rider spurred.

Tuck went skidding through the dust, rolling over once or twice, choking. Though the captor stopped his horse in yards, Tuck could hardly rise; he found himself staggering weakly, his thigh bleeding anew. He was now near Jennie and the workers by the branding iron fire.

When the rider jerked him off his feet, Jennie cried fiercely, "Stop that! Can't you see he's still bleeding from Jed's shot?"

The rider on the horse by the dallied rope turned, and Tuck saw Pepper Click's face, sweating, grinning with fiendish glee. "I've just begun!" the ranch jumper cried.

Near Jennie the several riders standing all laughed. One, his white teeth agleam in his dark countenance, was Jed Wolf. Surprisingly, Jennie sprang upon the group, startling them, and whirled around, a Colt hammer clicking as she thumbed back someone's six-gun.

"Let him loose, Pepper!" she cried, the gun on him, her back on the group from which she had lifted the weapon.

Click sourly loosened and freed the dallied rope.

Tuck breathed deeply as the noose expanded and slid down onto the earth.

It was then Jed Wolf, stepping behind Jennie, reached around her and struck her right forearm with a chopping blow, making her scream and drop the gun.

"So that's how it is, Jennie!" cried Jed, his lips thin.

Jennie, speaking very low, nodded. "It is, Jed. How many days ago was it you shot him twice—after he saved your life in Coyote Basin, then Black Mountain?"

Jed Wolf glanced about at the gathering hands, almost all staring at him curiously. He did not like the expressions he saw; but he said, "Click, pick up that rope end. Lead W.^lds to that empty oats bin of his in the barn till we decide what to do with him."

After Pepper Click picked up the rope end, dallied it again on the saddle horn and began to walk his horse toward the barn, pulling Tuck stumblingly along behind him, Jennie called, "Hurt him, Pepper, I'll kill you!"

Click answered nothing, but slowed his mount. When he stopped by the barn, he asked, "Where is the ranch option I signed over to you? I want it pronto."

Tuck chuckled wearily. "Search me; then try Hell Ranch."

"You would leave it with that squaw man!" Click ejaculated angrily, red-faced; but he believed the answer. Quickly he dismounted, stripped off Tuck's gunbelt, tied his hands behind him, then kicked him with a boot sole into the nearly empty oats bin, the door of which he shut behind his captive, fastening it by half turning the heavy cock of wood bolted on the jamb.

Sitting in the close semi-darkness, Tuck heard the creak of Click's saddle leather, the clip-clop of his horse's hooves fading away. Tuck dropped his head in his hands, slaking. If only he wasn't so weak, he thought. And now

he was without a weapon.

Sighing, he stretched on his good side as best he could with his hands bound and went to sleep on the soft mattress of oats.

He woke in the early dawn, or so it seemed from the faint light through the few thin cracks between the siding, to the sound of a horse galloping nearer. When the animal skidded to a stop, he heard a voice calling excitedly, "Uteal!" Other voices answered, from where, Tuck gathered, the outlaws must have made camp only a short distance from the barn.

Immediately, Tuck heard boots pounding earth, men yelling, and then the shrill neighing of horses being caught up. He wondered if he would be forgotten, left to rot in the oats bin. Then he heard a horse nearing, boots thudding into the barn alleyway.

The wooden cock on the door jamb was turned, and the heavy planks on their barn hinges squeaked open. In the dawn light Tuck blinked at Jed Wolf standing there, eying him savagely.

"Get out," Jed ordered, "pronto!"

Tuck stood up and walked stiffly out of the bin. Jed circled a loop over Tuck's shoulders, despite the tied hands, tightened it, then stepped up on his gray and unled the rope. Tuck saw Jennie nudge near on a mustang, her feet tied in the stirrups. Her face was pale.

"Run or be dragged, W.^lds," Wolf spoke as if pleased

at his captive's predicament.

The other riders were already strung out at a gallop eastward, spurring down into Yellow Creek, heading up over the bank and toward the desert.

Jennie cried, "Let Tuck ride double with me, Jed, if you'll not catch him a horse!"

Unanswering, Jed spurred his roan; as he went past Jennie's mustang, he cut it with a quart, making it hump once, then stretch out, running after the others. The rope holding Tuck jerked him off his feet. Again he was dragged, and he felt pain; fresh blood felt slick on him.

Tuck heard Jennie scream, not realizing he had narrowly missed striking some creek-bank cottonwoods.

The rope slid him down the creek back into the water. In the stream, Jed Wolf reined his roan temporarily. Tuck thought at first it was because Jed did not want him drowned, wanted his torture to last longer.

Then, a distance beyond the far creek bank, Tuck, too, heard rifles crack; six-guns joined, banging furiously. The high, shrill war cries of Utes came on the wind from the desert, where the bucks must have been awaiting the white riders. Jed Wolf glanced at Jennie, nudging her haltered mustang in the creek, then at the rope holding Tuck.

In the respite, Tuck managed a footing in the water. When Jed wheeled his roan, whirling it back past Tuck, the captive staggered, slid and fell again. Jed's wet

rope came off the downed man's shoulders. Sputtering, swallowing water, Tuck staggered in the creek, trying to find solid footing.

Not yet noticing Tuck was free, Jed Wolf, his left hand catching and holding the rein of Jennie's mustang, was savagely spurring his roan back up the wet bank on the west he had just descended, taking Jennie along. Jennie seemed trying to free her rein, but Jed's clamp was iron-hard.

From the east, also back-trailing, began to stream others of the outlaw band. They spurred savagely, splashing back down into the creek; one man, Tuck noticed, had a Ute arrow in one shoulder. With the mounted horses was one that ran riderless, but still pounded down with the others into the creek.

In the water, all about him, the gang raked rowels, splashing, crossing the creek in retreat.

The Ute yells seemed to come closer, making the riders and horses frenzied in their efforts to escape.

Then, on the crest of the west bank, Tuck saw Jed Wolf's head turn. Jed then first realized Tuck was out of his loop, not being dragged behind. Jed's six-gun swung up fast, his body twisting to shoot.

But riders were still splashing all about Tuck. Jed could not safely shoot without endangering, perhaps endangering his own men. He lowered his gun and spurred it off sight over the creek bank, still holding Jennie's mount's rein, taking her along as a captive.

Ute yells chorused out of the eastern desert, coming after the white riders; and the panic-driven riders spewed through the creek around Tuck, leaving him, they thought, to the less tender mercies of the Ute bucks.

Splashing out of the creek, spurring up the bank behind Jed Wolf, went the fleeing gang, the last one disappearing almost as quickly as they first had appeared in retreat.

Tuck made for the several cottonwoods hanging from the west bank over the water; he, too, knew that Utes on the warpath were impartial as to victims.

Then the cottonwood branches and leaves sweeping the surface of the creek were overhead, about him; and he froze, looking back toward the east bank.

A first Ute horseman showed, his Indian dress bright, his face dark above the rifle caught under his right arm. Other mounted, armed bucks showed, their earrings and bracelets glinting, barbaric with beadwork and feathers. They pulled up on the bank as if waiting for someone before continuing their pursuit.

Tuck trembled, for he knew they could see him, sharp as their eyes were. Yet he remained unmolested.

Then up on the bank among the Utes came a white rider, sitting sideways on a strong bronco. The man's clothes were beaded buckskin, much like the Utes, but he wore cowboy boots and a big hat. Behind him was mounted a squaw holding him on his mount. Tuck knew the face, the long shoulder-length hair. Relief surged

through him.

He called, "Scotty! It's me—Tuck!"

He splashed from hiding out into the creek, looking up at his friend, wishing he could wave his arms, which were still bound behind him. Then he slid, fell, and the water closed over him.

He next found himself stretched on the river bank, alone with Scotty and his squaw Silverheels; he was soaking wet and shivering, nearly naked as bandages were being wrapped about his re-opened thigh wound. Finally the two helped him reclothe himself, and he sat up.

"The bucks after Jed Wolf's band?" he asked.

Scotty, panting, weak from his ride and his own recent gunshot, leaned back against a cottonwood trunk on the bank. "Nope," he grunted. "These were Utes I—we knew. Dan found 'em hunting, brought 'em. They're scared about the few whites they've killed already. They took off, except for Bone. Jed's got eleven men still with him. Bone's going to trail them, find where they're going."

"I'd better ride after him," Tuck said. "Jennie's still being dragged along, tied to the stirrups."

"You'd fall outta the saddle from weakness now, Tuck. You've got to rest awhile. Bone will bring us news at Hell Ranch." To Silverheels, he said, "Bring the 'sobs."

Silverheels, leaving the two men, straddled the pony Judy and she had been riding double and loped east, out

of sight of the watchers on the bank.

The second day afterward Tuck was feeling better; sitting out under the shade of the cottonwoods along the river bank at Hell Ranch, he saw two oddly matched riders coming west across the desert.

Scotty, coming out the store, using a cane in one hand, a homemade crutch in the other, joined Tuck and watched the two riders near. Scotty was getting his strength back more slowly than Tuck. His skin still held a pale, yellowish tinge.

"One rider's Bone, my Ute," Scotty said, peering under a palm toward the arrivals. "But who's the small boy?"

"It's the Reese boy, Tom," Tuck said. Quickly, he told Scotty how he had helped the family when it had had typhoid.

When the two riders pulled up, little Tom Reese, sliding from the pony given him by Tuck, hurried up to them.

"Tuck," the boy said, his lower lip trembling, "Sheriff Beck's heard you're here, and he's right behind me; would have been ahead, if I hadn't lied. He intends to take you in to jail. You'll have to ride out fast."

Bone, still sitting his paint pony, interposed, "I follow Jed Wolf's men. They move into one of two cairns along Little Snake River."

"They got Jennie?" Tuck asked quickly.

"An old drifter couple keep her shot in the lean-to of second cabin," Bone replied.

Tuck hitched up his gunbelt. "Lend me your best pony, Scotty. I'll be riding for the Little Snake pronto."

12.

By the time Tuck struck the stage road that ran by the Little Snake, going from Ute Ford to the railroad, he had glimpsed several low cabins of the Appalachian settlers along the river among the cottonwoods.

Scotty's pony was carrying him along the stage road over a hill when down ahead and along the river he saw the outlaws' hide-out; he immediately pulled up the pony, dismounted by some aspen, held the pony's nose to forestall him from warning those below of his arrival, and studied the site below.

The two rickety cabins, both with doors made from cowhide, chimneys of sticks daubed with mud, were separated by a gully running from the river. Before the near cabin, the one with a lean-to, an aged man, white-bearded and wearing bib overalls, sat cradling a rifle, a hound sleeping at his feet. It was in this lean-to Jennie was a prisoner, according to Bone.

The window of the second, far cabin was shuttered, and in an adjacent corral was crowded the horses of

Jed's riders; four men squatted about a blanket on the shaky side of that building, gambling, while two others dozed or rested, half visible under the cottonwoods alongside the river bank.

A glint of metal on the hill rising at the end of the gully away from the river Tuck figured came from rifleman, obviously a guard. If Tuck, or an unknown, tried to ride in to the area of the cabins, he would be in range of the hill guard.

Suddenly, behind Tuck, back along the rocky stage road, a shod horse's shoe struck a rock. Quickly Tuck pulled the pony deeper into the covering of hazelnut, box elder, and ash, his mind immediately dismissing the idea of a Wolf rider, flashing to thought of Sheriff Beck, who the Reese boy had mentioned was riding behind him. Under his breath Tuck cursed the bad timing of the lawman's arrival. Now he was between the outlaws—and the lawman.

Hidden, Tuck waited, watching for the horse and rider behind. Sweat came out on his face, and gnats gathered hungrily, but he dared not even brush them off. If Sheriff Beck was behind, he would catch any movement. Minutes stretched long brought no one. Then Tuck knew the man behind realized his horse had given him away; he had left the trail only a piece behind Tuck.

Tuck looked at the sun, now diffusing a reddish purple along the western horizon, then decided to scout to the rear. He did not want Sheriff Beck after him as he stole

down toward the river cabins. Carefully skirting the stage road, Tuck stalked rearward along the hill, keeping undercover all the time.

Abruptly, only a dozen yards ahead of him, Sheriff Beck's voice broke the silence. "Come on along, Wilds! I got the drop on you!"

"Coming!" Tuck said, inwardly raging.

Leaving the brush, Tuck stepped slowly toward the sound of the voice.

Sheriff Beck, his right hand holding a six-gun, moved around a clump of oaks, his Mexican spurs jingling. Seeing Tuck's hands loose at his sides, the lawman eased the hammer back on his right gun and slid it back into his holster. Beck had not even pulled his left gun.

"Thought that rock the boss clicked gave me away," the sheriff said unemotionally.

"You looking for me, I guess?"

"Uh-huh. Jed and you both. Your coming after him has been a convenience for me."

"Well," Tuck said, anger bitter in his voice, "I'm glad I was so helpful."

"You're aiming to free Jennie?" Beck asked quietly.

"Yep," Tuck grunted.

"Scoty said you were, and advised me what you were up against," the sheriff said.

In the last blaze of day, the big, somber man—with his face under the hat dark, his hip boots—looked more like a ruffian than a sheriff.

"I'll have enough trouble getting Jennie away without you behind," Tuck said bitterly.

"How many of them?" Beck asked calmly. His horse came up behind him, nudging at his pocket, as if looking for a lump of sugar.

"Twelve," Tuck said, "not counting the old geezer whose place they're camping on, and who's sitting out there, picking his teeth on a rifle, so to speak." He halted, anger still in his voice.

"Any guards besides the old-timer?"

"One up on the hill behind, waiting to bushwhack any fool riding in the camp."

"You were going in after dark?"

"I'd planned to."

Sheriff Beck studied Tuck. "I want the girl out, too, Wilds. In case of shooting, which I calculate to be likely, she's in danger in one of these drifter cabins. Bullets will go right through the thin walls."

"She's in the lean-to," Tuck said. "Leastways Bone thought so, and I'm inclined to agree."

"Let's take a look-see before darkness sets in," said Beck easily.

"As you say, Sheriff." Tuck sighed, relieved at the other's attitude, then turned about.

Walking along the rocky hill, side by side, the two came to where Tuck had left his pony in the brush; entering there, they eased through the cover to peer below.

The scene was unchanged, except that the bearded old man, having put up his rifle, was carrying a pail of slop to his hogs in the pen, followed by the hound. In his place sat an outlaw armed with a rifle, sourly looking over at the hill where the hidden guard was. As the two watched, blue smoke began to come from the mud-daubed stick chimney of the cabin with the lean-to, indicating supper was on. When the old man returned from his chore, he entered the cabin. Soon, wiping his mouth with one hand, catching up his rifle with the other, the old-timer made again for his original seat on either a rock or a stump, the hound nosing behind hungrily. The outlaw rider strode to the gully, slid down and disappeared in it; Tuck was soon sure this rider was replacing the guard up in the pines on the back hill, for after some minutes a bigger man scrambled out of the gully near where the other man had entered. This rifleman made for the far cabin, where the outlaws were gathering.

"I could give myself up to you peaceful like, Beck," Tuck spoke low, tensely, "if you'd let me get Jennie out of there first."

"My idea," Sheriff Beck agreed. "But we'll wait till shortly after dark; then I'll take that guard up on the hill out of the way for you. No need to take the risk of him spotting you."

"I'd appreciate your help," Tuck said gratefully.

"Scatty was real sorry he wasn't physically able to

ride out with you," Sheriff Beck said slowly. "He gave me some insight into how your ranch was jumped, the reasons for your gunplay on Yellow Creek. He's a good friend of yours."

"The best," Tuck agreed.

After a while Sheriff Beck and Tuck stole down the hill in the early darkness; they parted at the gully in the valley. The lawman stole across the prairie, heading for the back hill to quiet the guard; while, carrying a generous chunk of gift venison, Tuck snaked down along the gully toward the cabins and the river. The gully appeared deserted, was overhung with brush.

Arriving without discovery in the gully between the two cabins, Tuck could hear from the far cabin, the one the outlaws occupied, the clatter of someone washing clothes in a tin pan, the talk of men starting up a card game or a lamplit table. That one or two men would be outside, breathing in the cooling night-time breeze, he knew he must expect. When he crawled out of the gully for the cabin with the lean-to, he was grateful for the cover of the weeds that were all about the cabin.

In the darkness, Tuck figured his biggest worry was the hound dog sitting near the bearded old mountain man. That hound could see in the darkness, and hear, too. He only hoped the chunk of venison he carried would keep the hound quiet.

He was halfway between the gully and the cabin when, his spurs tinkling, a rider crossed the gully, coming be-

hind him. Tuck dropped flat onto the earth, his hand pulling out his knife.

The rider striding through the rustling weeds swerved then; he angled toward the old guard and called, "It's me, Jed."

Tuck heard the bearded old man chuckle hoarsely. "I figured one nightfall you'd come to spark. The woman's got the key." The old man's broken cackle made Jed Wolf swing savagely to the cabin and lean-to.

A hide masked the window when Jed rapped on the cabin door jamb. Tuck heard an old woman inside say, "I heerd you, Jed. Come in." Then the light of a kerosene lamp spiled into the night as the hide door was shoved aside.

Tuck lay, anger flooding him, as he heard a padlock click inside, a chain rattle, the squeak of rusty hinges.

Jed Wolf's voice came through the night. "Come out, Jennie. I know you're tired of that pest-hole by now." As Tuck waited, Jed added roughly, "Come out pronto, or I'll bring you."

Tuck heard Jennie scream. The sound carried clear across the gully to the cabin where most of the gang seemed to be slapping cards. Laughter rippled from there to Tuck. The crude remarks were unintelligible, but Tuck understood them. He went cold; then he stood up in the weeds and began to walk toward the front doorway which Jed Wolf had entered.

"Who's that?" the old man called from his seat outside. Then, surprisingly quickly, "Sick 'mn, boy!"

Tuck had forgotten the old-timer in his fury; but he tossed the venison chunk toward the leaping hound, though afraid it was useless. Then he slid aside the hide door and jumped into the room gloomly lit by a sooty kerosene lamp; his knife glittered in his hand.

Whirling at the sound of the slithering hide, Jed Wolf, seeing Tuck, grimaced. His right hand slapped down.

Exposed by Jed's move, Jennie Myers, white and thin, saared past Jed at Tuck. Though not making a sound, her lips seemed to form his name.

A few feet from the unlocked door going into the lean-to, a bent, aged crone in a floor-length Mother Hubbard still held a key, an opened padlock; her wrinkled face expressed dismay.

His hatred showing plainly now in a snarl, Jed Wolf dashed his gun from its holster. Already lunging, Tuck thrust the knife blade into Jed's belly before the drawn gun was leveled.

As Jed screamed, blood flooded back onto Tuck's hand. Jed's gun blasted, flaming toward the dirt floor. Jed pulled back, noisily smashing into an old chair. His six-gun fell.

Tuck stood momentarily holding the bloody knife.

The old woman squailed shrilly; Jennie whimpered then Jed slid onto the floor.

The hide door crackled behind Tuck, and he turned.

Blinded temporarily by the lamplight, the bearded old mountain man peered into the room. "What—?" he cried, shoving through the doorway. His rifle was in his right hand.

Tuck slashed at the rifle-carrying arm, making the old-timer cry out, drop his weapon and clutch the wounded right forearm with his left hand.

Almost immediately, the old woman sprang at Tuck, clawing, yelling deafeningly; but Tuck thrust her away. She fell back over Jed, now stirring on the earthen floor.

The old man bent to the dirt floor, reaching with his good arm for his rifle. Tuck stamped the searching fingers, making the old man yell.

Turning, Tuck caught Jennie's right arm with his left. "C'mon!" As he pulled Jennie toward the doorway, he saw Jed Wolf, rising unsteadily to his knees despite the blood darkening his waist front; Jed's hand reached for his six-gun on the floor.

Without loosening Jennie's arm, Tuck kicked Jed's dark jaw with a boot.

At the last instant Jed thought to catch Tuck's foot; but he was slow; the jarring blow sprawled him flat.

Tuck pulled Jennie through the doorway.

"What the—?" yelled a rider crashing through weeds by the outlaws' cabin beyond the gully.

There was no way out Tuck considered better than the gully. Without pausing, he pulled Jennie along to-

ward it.

Just as the two slid into the gully, a rifleman fired, the slug singing overhead. Sheathing his knife, Tuck turned Jennie with him along the gully. Suddenly the girl stumbled and spilled to earth, stopping them.

The rifleman by the outlaw cabin began yelling for others.

Tuck bent, raised Jennie to her feet, heard her whimpers.

"My—ankle—turned!" her voice mourned low.

From the cabin of the outlaws, now spewing men, six-guns and rifles began to flash and roar. Bullets cut out and rattled weeds along the top of the gully.

With his left arm, Tuck encircled the girl's waist; he began to half carry, half support her along the gully away from the cabins, then out on the prairie.

"Now, up this hill!" Tuck said.

Jennie looked at the black, steep slope of the hill above them, "I'll try."

They began scrambling up the hill, catching at brush for help. Horses came close, their riders yelling them on.

"It's not too far!" Tuck panted.

"Thank heaven!"

Horses were underneath the hill on the prairie; Tuck could hear the creak of leather, the cries of inquiring riders. While it was slow going uphill for Jennie and Tuck, it was not possible for the horsemen to ride up the

steep slope. The horsemen gathered at the hill bottom.

A rider, hearing the two crashing brush above him on the steep slope, fired, the bullet thudding into the earth near them.

Jennie moaned, "We'll never make it."

From the brow of the bluff above the two a rifle cracked, and Tuck felt cold despite the perspiration drenching him. He thought, Some rider's circled us!

"Wilds, bring her on up!" Sheriff Beck called.

Relief flooded over Tuck. Beck, after taking out the guard on the back hill, had perhaps anticipated this and forted up above. A good man, Tuck thought warmly.

"We'll make it!" he told Jennie. "It's the sheriff."

Jennie began to help him struggle upward.

Beck, shooting then moving above the two, covered them well as they fought on toward him. Below, cries of pain and rage rose. The massed riders, dark at the foot of the hill, began to whirl their horses, scattering under the sheriff's rifle fire, some shooting, not at the two climbers but up at Sheriff Beck's rifle flashes.

As Jennie and Tuck, both with heaving chests, neared the crest of the hill, Tuck called, "Beck!"

The sheriff, ceasing his rifle fire, slid a few feet down, and Tuck felt satisfaction at seeing his black bulk in the night.

"Hurt, girl?" the lawman asked.

Jennie Myers laughed almost hysterically. "A turned ankle. It would happen during this—"

Beck helped Tuck haul Jennie over the lip of the slope.

"You're plucky, coming out of this!" the lawman exclaimed. Then: "Wilds, get your horse and ride out of here double. I'll cover our back trail."

"Nope," Tuck said, his breathing almost normal. "That's my job. You help Jennie out." Tuck left the girl's support to the sheriff, strode to his horse, slid out his saddle gun, pocketed some shells from a saddlebag. Below, the rifles were silent.

Only minutes after the sheriff and Jennie, riding double, loped away on the rocky stage road toward Ute Ford, Tuck heard a stick down-hill crack under a boot, and, knowing he must try to make those below think all were still present, sent a rifle bullet at the sound.

Although he moved swiftly several yards away, three guns from below on the slope threw lead through the brush he had used for cover, cutting branches.

A rock went tumbling down the hill minutes later, starting from much closer up toward him. He fired the rifle down, only wasting a shell, then rolled and levered again. No less than half a dozen guns flamed orange all along the bluff below, slugs hitting earth, sod, brush, one a rock, then singing away. From the gunfire it seemed the ends of the climbing line were becoming a half-moon, spreading as if to ensnare him.

Then the moon chose to come from behind a scudding black cloud, dimly lighting the sharp slope. Tuck felt the climbers were worse off than he was. As they

scrambled upward, he could get in a shot or shots.

Then below, down at the foot of the hill, he heard Jed call.

"Git Wilds! And the girl!"

One of the men on the hillside responded, "Will do, Jed!"

Tuck went colder than the cool night air sweeping up the hill. With Jed, mean mad as he was from his wound, Tuck knew he would be run to earth like a rabid animal.

Without even bothering to fire below again, Tuck turned and began to hurry back to his horse. The sheriff and Jennie now had a fair start. They should make good time on the stage road to Ute Ford, even riding double. It was time he started his retreat—while he could.

Nearing Scotty's pony, not as nervous from the shooting as he expected, Tuck caught the rein and began to lead the animal through the hazelnut, ash, and box elder toward the stage road. Before parting the final cover, he scanned the rocky, moonlit trail. It seemed deserted in the pale light. He mounted, still carrying his rifle, and rode out.

He had covered hardly a hundred yards when a gun flashed from scrub oak on the left. He snapped a wild, useless shot in return, then bent low on the frantically running pony. Almost simultaneously, a shot came from his left. The pony stumbled under him. Hit! he thought. Then the animal bolted ahead. No more gunfire came.

Before Tuck realized there would be no pursuit, he

was a couple of miles along the stage road. The pony was running weakly, occasionally stumbling. Tuck understood he would soon be afoot. The second shot from ambush was taking effect on the pony. Tuck only hoped those behind did not know the pony was dying on his feet.

After the pony slowed to a shambling walk, Tuck pulled up. The pony stopped, standing oddly, his feet far apart, as if afraid of falling. Leather covered the animal's hide, even in the cool night. Tuck wiped his face, finding the pony's blood flecked it. Dismounting, he listened to the animal wheezing; and then, sadly, leading the pony off the road and back of a clump of scrub oak, he pulled off saddle and bridle and cached them near.

He wanted to put the dying horse out of his misery; but he dared not risk the sound of a shot.

Leaving the pony, he stepped back into the road, rifle in hand, and began to walk on along the stage road toward Ute Ford.

Tuck recognized Sheriff Beck's figure even in the pale when he heard two horses coming from the direction of Ute Ford. He stirred, and crawled where he could see the stage road, which was moonlit. Only one rider was approaching, but this rider was leading a second horse. Tuck recognized Sheriff Beck's figure even in the pale light.

"Sheriff," he called, "I'm almost glad to see you."

The lawman reined up, watching Tuck limp toward

him. "You hurt?"

"My feet are raw," Tuck said. "I'm right pleased you've a mount for me."

Beck watched Tuck climb wearily into the saddle of the horse he had been leading. "I was afraid I'd be returning you back belly down on this horse. I figured they'd leave no horse to carry you in, even dead."

"My pony—Scotty's—got shot," Tuck admitted, sliding his rifle into the leather case under his leg.

Beck pulled about, not loosening the lead rope on Tuck's mount, thus taking him along. "Wilds," he said embarrassedly, "they've got to know you're my prisoner when we get to Ute Ford. You can keep your guns, but I'll have to tie your hands to the horn before we meet anybody. I'll use a slip-knot; it'll not be tight, but it'll do for appearances."

"Sure," Tuck asked tiredly; "Jennie in Ute Ford?"

"She's safe there, and sure you'd be alive. She's already planning on coming into the county seat with us, helping hire you a lawyer. She'll make a good wife."

"If the jury don't hang me or send me to the pen," Tuck rejoined a bit bitterly. "What I hate about in jail is Jed Wolf's being loose."

"I'm expecting him to show," said Beck, "presuming he lives through your knifing."

Tuck growled, "He was live enough to show up slow the hill back there where we separated and sick his boys on me."

"Jennie and you'll be the bait that draws him to me."

"Not Jennie!" Tuck cried.

Beck said quietly, "He's already carried her off once, hasn't he?"

"I take back my word to you, Sheriff!"

"Don't. I'll protect her, *amigo*. As for you, you'll be safe in jail."

"As you say."

The two rode on along the moonlit stage road toward Ute Ford.

In broad daylight, his hands fastened by a loose slip-knot to the saddle horn, though his six-gun still was holstered on his thigh, his rifle in the leather case under his leg, Tuck was led by Sheriff Beck along the main street of Ute Ford.

The sheriff reined up as Mrs. Kelly, her arms akimbo on her broad hips, stepped onto the boardwalk from the hotel, followed quickly by Jennie Myers, in cowboy garb, wearing a new shirt, and buckling a gunbelt about her slender waist. She favored her turned ankle only slightly.

Sheriff Beck touched his big hat. "Day, ladies," he spoke courteously.

Mrs. Kelly, looking only at Beck, said, "Better not stop in Ute Ford today, Sheriff. I'll personally egg on the men to take away your prisoner."

"Thank ye for telling me, ma'am," Beck answered, still courteously. "I appreciate your sincerity."

"Why'd you tie Tuck's hands?" asked Jennie bitterly.

"He gave himself up, didn't he?"

"He did," nodded the lawman. "But he doesn't want any trouble here, any more than me."

Jennie moved to Tuck's horse. "Bend down, Tuck," she ordered, unsmiling.

Tuck did, and the girl's warm lips pressed against his, while her hands gripped his shoulders.

When Jennie stepped back, her face flushed, she said, "I've provisions for all of us in my saddlebags, Sheriff, and I'm riding onto the county seat with you, like I said, so see a good lawyer gives Tuck the best defense possible."

Still courteously, Sheriff Beck responded, "Miss Jennie, I've depended on that. I'd have insisted on it, even if you'd changed your mind. Tuck tells me Jed Wolf, despite his wound, is able to get about; and you'll be safer in Grand City, where I can keep an eye out for you."

Mrs. Kelly, dropping her arms, said, "You better protect her well, Sheriff, against that Jed."

Jennie, stepping to a solid-bottomed bronco at the near hitch rack, one carrying a saddle carbine, full bags, and a trail roll, climbed easily into the leather, then turned the animal to join the sheriff and Tuck.

"Let's ride," she said; "when we stop tonight, I'll fix you both a good meal."

The three of them rode on down the street, past the livery stable, out into the road toward the county seat.

It began to rain the next day, and the road to Grand City became a slippery, muddy quagmire, the three riding

in slickers, with the rain trickling from their hat brims, while their horses sloughed ahead. Jennie and Tuck rode side by side, trailing, Sheriff Beck ahead.

The three camped that night under an overhanging bluff, and found it slow making a fire with wet materials. Later, sipping coffee, Beck said, "That wound must have slowed Jed. But I'm still convinced he'll show, in due time. Miss Jennie, I want you to stick close to the hotel when we get to town; never get out except in daylight, when others are about. I'll be watching over you, or a deputy will, when it's possible."

"Jed escaped your jail," Jennie reminded him. "You'll have to have a guard protecting Tuck if he's unarmed in a cell."

"I can't do otherwise for Tuck, can I? I'll see Jed doesn't do any bushwhacking, either." Rising from the feeble, sputtering fire, putting his now emptied tin cup by his saddle in the darkness, the sheriff added; "Last night we were all on guard. Tonight, Miss Jennie, you sleep. You need the rest; this is a rough trail for a girl."

Jennie answered firmly, "I'll guard a turn, girl or not."

Beck signed. "I never argue with a woman." Turning back into the dark, he added, "I'll scout, do first guard."

As the sheriff's boots slapped away in the mucky earth, Jennie, putting her cup down, stretching a hand down to Tuck. "He understands—"

Jennie was let into the jail in Grand City. With her was an aged, stoop-shouldered defense lawyer. Mr. Curtis had been briefed by Jennie, and he asked only sharp, pertinent questions on the whole affair.

The lawyer said finally, "After I've paraded character witnesses for you, Mr. Wilds, before a jury of ranchers, particularly those who moved in like you, fixed up a place, and then themselves were forced to take out homestead papers—finding they couldn't rely on squatter's rights forever—I hope to free you."

Tuck replied, "But I did the killing. I won't lie out of that."

"We can only throw ourselves on the mercy of the jury," Mr. Curtis stated. "There's no love in this county for any person or persons doing ranch jumping."

Before she left, Jennie clung to Tuck and kissed him. After she went out with Mr. Curtis, Tuck found tears in his own eyes.

Though he knew justice was simple, fast, and untrammeled here, Tuck found it strange to be led dressed as

usual (except for his gun belt) into the courtroom where he had once testified against Jed Wolf. The court scene seemed much as he remembered that time. Even Jennie sat there, only this time near where he was placed by Mr. Curtis.

The judge, whom he had last seen at Wolf's trial, still wearing a big hat and the same long Prince Albert coat, walked in heavily to seat himself at the table holding a pitcher of water. Immediately leaning back his chair, the judge shifted his tobacco, spat in a box of sand, began rapping a boot heel on the table for order so roughly that it shook the pitcher of water dangerously.

Seated by Tuck, Mr. Curtis leaned to whisper in his client's ear: "Were in luck, due to Jennie's help. This lawyer Harrington from Denver that gave Ab Myers, Jed Wolf, and the gang information that your ranch wasn't legally homesteaded was passing trough on business; and Jennie remembered him. I've subpoenaed him, as a witness for our case."

Tuck looked his thanks past the lawyer at Jennie today pale and taut-looking in a gingham gown. Behind the girl, the benches furnishing the courtroom were now nearly filled.

A man acting as clerk, wearing a gun like everybody else, including the judge, soon called the first prospective juror. Curtis verified the man was a ranch owner and accepted him.

This process was repeated, only a few men being

rejected by the defense counsel, till the jury box held twelve ranchers; and even the prosecutor, sensing the import of this too late, began biting at his long gray moustache ends nervously.

Tuck had not noticed S.C. Pepper Click in the back on a bench till the claim jumper was paraded to the stand by the prosecuting attorney. Pepper's story, surprisingly enough, was very factual. His only contention was that he understood Tuck's Yellow Creek ranch was deserted property and, not being homesteaded legally, free for him to file on as his; he had taken along his brother, Levi, and Pete Cravens, the deceased men, he testified, to help him ranch the place.

Mr. Curtis, in due time, questioned this witness of the prosecution scornfully. "You had been on drives through the Yellow Creek area many times, had you not, Mr. Click, before you homesteaded there?"

Pepper Click, starting in the witness chair, considered the question, admitting, "Several times."

"Isn't several dozens of times?" Tuck knew Jennie had given Curtis this tip.

Pepper Click agreed, swallowing. "Yep."

"You knew my client had resided there some seven to eight years. Did you not learn"—Mr. Curtis pointed his finger at Click—"from a Denver attorney named Harrington that the place was not filed on?"

Though Tuck looked, he did not see Harrington in the courtroom. He guessed Mr. Curtis was keeping the

lawyer cached away as a surprise witness.

Pepper Click snorted loudly, "Never heard of such a lawyer as this Harrington."

"Were there not horses in Wilds' ranch corral you took over? Sour dough in a jar in the kitchen, Mr. Click?"

Click hesitated, then admitted to these facts, adding, "But there was no man about. The cabin was deserted, I say."

Mr. Curtis did not press this matter; he began calling character witnesses for the defense. Jennie was among these. The prosecution approached her with one question: "Aren't you the defendant's fiancée?"

Jennie colored, but flung her head back. "I'd marry Tuck tonight," she said,—"if the gentlemen of the jury reach a decision so soon."

The jurymen leaned forward, interested.

The prosecutor, smiling, dismissed Jennie and took his seat.

Dr. Kincaid, next called for the defense, told how Mr. and Mrs. Reese and their family had been cared for by Tuck without thought of recompense. The jury nodded approval of this, showing Tuck friendly faces.

Late in the afternoon, Mr. Curtis nodded to Sheriff Beck and called for witness for the defense Harrington.

The prosecutor and Pepper Click whispered excitedly, the former angry, the latter pale and shaken. When the dapper, city-dressed Harrington was brought from outside by the sheriff, the courtroom buzzed. Mr. Harrington,

though obviously not desiring to be present, made the best of the matter as he took the stand after his swearing in.

Mr. Curtis asked immediately, "Is the man here the one you told, along with Ab Myers, deceased, and Jed Wolf, an outlaw who escaped from our jail here before being taken to the state penitentiary, that Tuck Wilds' ranch was not legally homesteaded?"

The dapper Harrington, nervously pulling down his gaudy vest, asked, "You mean S.C. Pepper Click?"

"I do," nodded Mr. Curtis.

After some hesitation Harrington pointed at Pepper Click, who half rose in anger from the bench when he sat, but was pulled down by the prosecuting lawyer, a muscular, middle-aged, town-clad man.

"You were paid for this information Wilds' ranch was legally homesteaded?"

"That is information I need not divulge," snapped Harrington.

Mr. Curtis looked at the twelve jurymen. "Fancy clothes must be given away in Denver if Mr. Harrington doesn't get paid for his work."

Several jurymen haw-hawed.

Harrington said quickly, "There is nothing illegal in securing and giving such information about unfiled land."

Mr. Curtis said bluntly, "You would look up information on any jurymen here if he had a ranch, would you not, seeing if he was a squatter?"

"I would have to," agreed Mr. Harrington, squirming "if asked to do so by a client."

"Mr. Harrington," advised Mr. Curtis bitingly, "I would not advise you to tarry in our fair county seat, or return here after this trial; sometimes, bera, justice is a quick rope, without benefit of jury. Even lawyers are not exempt from this style law here."

Mr. Harrington, once out of the stand, looked eager to follow the defense counsel's advice and leave, but Sheriff Beck at the courtroom door, kept him inside.

Tuck was not called onto the stand by Mr. Curtis, who finished his legal résumé with the argument that, to a man on the frontier, the unwritten law of the West was in favor of his defending land he had discovered, fenced, constructed buildings on—despite the fact he had not filed his claim yet.

After Mr. Curtis, his plea finished, walked away from the jury, the judge turned to them. They were watching the counsel for the defense, wiping the perspiration from his face, sit by Tuck and throw an arm about his shoulders.

"Gentlemen of the jury, the case is yours, Mr. Shields, as foreman, will you render a verdict after due deliberation?"

"Yes, sir, Judge." Mr. Shields, a gray-mutton-whiskered old rancher, turned and whispered to his fellow jury members seated back of a table with him.

Back along the benches the audience, mainly cowmen, began to voice their suggestions boisterously to the whis-

pering jury, seeming to favor Tuck.

The judge rapped his boot heels again for order. Though his chair teetered dangerously, he managed to keep it balanced on the rear two legs.

As quiet returned, the old rancher Shields stood up. Tuck tried to find any emotion showing on the jury foreman's leathery face behind his whiskers, but could not.

"You have reached a decision? the judge asked.

"We have, Judge—Your Honor."

"Render the verdict."

Mr. Shields rested his right palm on his gun butt, which he, like all the jury, still wore, as if ready to back his decision. "Your Honor, Judge, we find the defendant not guilty."

Yells broke up the trial.

Jennie sprang past Mr. Curtis, wiping away tears of happiness; and Tuck rose to find her in his arms.

He asked her, "You mean you'll marry me-tonight?"

"I do!"

"You mind if I invite the jurymen to our wedding?"

"I'd be mad at you if you didn't. The judge, and Mr. Curtis, too."

The jurymen, slowed because they had to file around a table to leave, paused as Jennie and Tuck, his arm about her, approached their exit between the table end and the wall.

Seeing Jennie and Tuck move, the judge, guessing they wanted to thank the jury, rapped his boot heels again

on the table. The room, nearly empty of watchers now, quieted.

"Gentlemen, I thank you. Miss Jennie, too. We'd like to invite all of you to our wedding tonight." Tuck turned to Jennie. "It's where? I don't know a preacher here, or a church—"

Jennie seemed as speechless as Tuck as she shook her head.

The judge, rising cried, "The new white frame church, the Reverend Whitaker?"

"I'll see the preacher—this Reverend Whitaker," Tuck said, "I'm free to do so, I guess."

"I'm got to go to the hotel first—" began Jennie.

Sheriff Beck, who had crossed the floor to stand beside the judge, clapped Tuck's shoulder. "You're free; but you've not got time to arrange the wedding. I'll arrange it for you with the parson; for I expect to be best man! But we'll have to escort Jennie to the hotel, from there to the church—after supper."

Smiling, the jury foreman, Shields, told Jennie, "We boys'll be at the wedding, all of us; we'd like to escort the bride from the hotel to the church."

"That's a good idea, Shields," Sheriff Beck agreed. "Jed Wolf's likely around. You boys wear your guns!" Beck raised his voice to be heard, for the few spectators began to whoop.

Shields, leading the other jurymen out, said bitterly, "Sheriff, you think we'd escort Miss Jennie to her wedding

and let anyone bother her?"

The jurymen, now grinning, began filing out of the courtroom on the heels of the last of the spectators.

Sheriff Beck, pressing a hand on his late prisoner's shoulder, said, "Tuck, don't either of you leave yet. I'll be back in a couple of minutes with your gunbelt." Before the lawman turned away, he added, "Reminds me. There's a letter here in my pocket I've meant to give you." He handed Tuck a sealed envelope, and was gone.

Jennie and Tuck stood alone in the courtroom now; seeing this, Tuck caught her close and kissed her.

"You mustn't!" Jennie cried. "It's bad luck. You've got to wait till after the wedding— Anyway, read your letter."

When she pulled away, Tuck reluctantly tore the envelope open. Quickly he glanced at its contents. Jennie watched him, then took the sheet of paper he handed her wordlessly.

"Who's—?" she asked. Then she began reading the letter.

"Our luck's good."

"This the mining company took an option on your Black Mountain mine?" she asked. "Why, you'll be in the money. I didn't know I was marrying anything but a Yellow Creek rancher!"

"I'm staying that," Tuck stated.

Jennie caught Tuck's near arm. "I'm glad." She moved to him, forgetting her own advice.

Sheriff Beck, coming back into the courtroom, trailed by the deputy Smitty, who had been on guard outside the jail, coughed; and Jennie and Tuck parted and turned. The lawman said, "Hate to advise it, Tuck, but you'd better wear this gunbelt to your wedding. A cowboy's just reported seeing Jed, with his riders, come into town. Knowing this, Smitty and I'd better escort Miss Jennie to the hotel."

Buckling on the gunbelt, Tuck said, "I'll make it three."

Sheriff Beck shook his head negatively. "No. As your best man, I've got to see you're a proper groom. I've had the barber stay open to see you get a haircut and a bath. After seeing Miss Jennie to J.R.'s, Smitty'll be bringing you black pants and a white shirt."

Tuck said, "You'll be looking up Jed alone—You won't have time to arrange the wedding."

"Smitty's pardner is doing that; that's what deputies are for, to relieve the sheriff of duties."

"I'll go with you," Tuck said, grim-faced. "You yourself said Jed had eight-nine—"

"I'm looking forward to being your best man before I start looking up Jed. I've never been one."

Jennie broke in, "I shouldn't confess it; but I've a dress I bought yesterday. I thought it'd make a nice wedding gown."

Beck smiled, "Why didn't you tell us, Miss Jennie? We'd no have had to hold this trial today."

Flushung, Jennie hurried across the courtroom, trailed by Beck's dark-faced deputy, trying to carry his shotgun inconspicuously.

Beck half whispered, "Tuck, keep an eye out for Jed or his riders going to the church. It's just east from the barbershop."

The two moved out the courtroom doorway behind Jennie and Smitty. As the lawman indicated the barbershop, he added humorously, "Don't let that barber douse too much of that sweet-smelling oil on you. If he does, Jennie'll never forgive you—or me." He twisted west.

Smiling, Tuck turned into the barbershop, the wall lamp of which was just being lighted as he entered.

The barber, obviously expecting his customer, locked the door behind him and pulled down the shades. "I'm to give you the bridegroom special." The barber a lean, half bald man, shook a white cloth as Tuck climbed into the chair.

"I appreciate the service."

"Beck said not to set you up where a bushwhacker could strike; reason I lowered the blinds." Scissors began snipping at Tuck's hair, long overdue for a cutting.

When the hot towel was taken off and the lather brush and straight razor were being wielded, the barber launched into a monologue on marriage. As the shopman gave his customer no time for comment, Tuck made none.

The barber only quieted as Tuck rose from the chair and walked into the back room for his bath. The water

awaiting him was scalding. As he lathered in the tub, he wondered how long it would take Jennie to bathe, fix her hair and put on her wedding dress. He guessed she would no more think of eating supper than he.

When drying with a bath towel, he heard a knock at the locked, outside barbershop door. The barber, obviously remembering Beck's warning, called, "Who is it?" Tuck moved toward his gunbelt on the clothes tree.

"Smitty," came the answer from the street. "I've got the brideroom a white shirt and black trousers from the store."

"Just a minute," said the barber.

Tuck heard the front bolt slide open. Suspiciously, the towel tied at his waist, gun in hand, he parted, peering through the curtains into the main shop.

The deputy who entered the barber shop held a white shirt and dark trousers over his left arm; he handed them to the barber. Through the curtain, Tuck asked, "Who'll I have to pay for these?"

The deputy grinned, taking a string tie from his pocket. "Sheriff Beck, I reckon. This tie's his own personal wedding gift, he said."

The barber handed Tuck the clothing through the parted curtains. "I'll never be able to thank Beck and you boys enough," Tuck said.

Turning to go, the deputy said, "Be sure you wear a gun, wedding or not. Beck has us helping the jurymen escort the bride to the church. He's sure Jed Wolf'll show."

The door clicked shut behind the deputy.

Tuck began to dress. He found the white shirt fitted well. The trousers were just snug enough at the waist, fell right, and he could leave them outside his boots, which the barber had rubbed. Tying the now necktie proved beyond Tuck's ability, however, and he was glad the barber, watching him struggle with it before the main shop mirror, said, "I'll help with that string tie, if you wish."

"Please."

The barber deftly tied the black bow at the throat of Tuck's white shirt. Then Tuck took his gunbelt, wiped it with a cloth, buckled it on. Thoughtfully, he bound down the holster.

Before he started outside, he paid the barber. That worthy said enthusiastically. "You're dressed fit for a wedding or a funeral."

"I guess."

As the barber realized his slip of the tongue and paled, Tuck opened the door, glanced up and down the street, stepped onto the boardwalk. Lamps were on in several scattered saloons, perhaps a few general stores—the only illumination.

The church was east, Sheriff Beck had said. Tuck angled into the street and, remaining in the middle, began to walk down the dusty, dimly lighted right of way, keeping his eyes moving from alley to vacant lot, street to false-front building top and porch roof. All seemed quiet, except for the occasional move of a hipshot bronco at a hitch rack, the sound of boisterous laughter from a saloon.

Rage flowed through Jed Wolf. "Harrington still in town?"

"Saw him leaving the hotel with his carpetbag as I turned in here."

"Finish that shot glass and come along with me," Jed ordered low.

Pepper looked at Jed, emptied his drink, and the two moved along to the back room. Wolf's riders there covertly studied Click as he came in with their boss.

"Harrington going to the livery stable?" Jed asked Click harshly.

"Heard he had a rig there," Pepper replied. He studied Jed. "You helping me get him?"

"Right. We'll leave by the back door." To the riders, Jed said, scowling, "Wait here!"

Coming around the dark side of the saloon outside, the two moved to the hitch rack. Jed untied his pony and mounted. Pepper stepped into his saddle, pulled around and joined Jed. The two prodded their horses into a lope toward the livery barn.

Ahead of them, under a lantern before the livery stable, a buggy pulled away; the driver slashed a whip. The team of western broncos took off down the road out of town, running.

"Come on!" Jed called to Pepper.

Baking spurs, the two riders passed the livery hostler, who scarcely glanced at them, figuring them to be just a couple of lubricated cowpunchers leaving town.

Jed Wolf was sitting in the back room of the Branding Iron Saloon, playing monte with three of his riders, while Dutch kibitzed, when he heard several of the spectators from the trial come drifting into the barroom in front, talking. He called Dutch to take his cards, rose, left the back room and went into the bar. When he heard a cowboy approve the verdict, "Not guilty," for Tuck Wilds, Jed smashed a fist onto the bar, drawing the bartender's scowl.

Attention was diverted as S.C. Pepper Click entered, wearing a hang-dog look, and sourly ignoring the several late trial spectators, bellied up to the bar and ordered a drink.

Jed moved along the bar, hooked a boot heel on the rail next to Pepper, and asked, "What went wrong at the court, Pepper?"

"That lawyer Harrington." Briefly, Pepper explained how the surprise evidence given by the dandy had toppled the prosecution's case against Wilds.

The buggy was rolling fast. Jed's pony, surging ahead of Pepper's, caught it in a few hundred yards, however. The dusk was deepening, but when Jed pulled up alongside the rig, Harrington glanced at him, startled, recognizing him even in the poor light; Harrington raised his whip again. Jed reckoned if the lawyer had a gun, he never thought of it.

Jed drew fast, triggering a shot into the buggy driver's side.

Harrington squealed, dropping his reins.

Jed fired a second time. Harrington began sliding down toward the buggy floor board quietly. The broncos, frightened, half left the road, and ran a right wheel over a boulder. The buggy tipped, spilling Harrington onto the ground, then righted. The team pounded ahead wildly, the empty buggy careening behind.

Back at the livery stable, the hostler came back under the lantern hung before the false front, peering at the sound, the flashes of the gunshots.

Pepper, coming up to Jed, cried, "Let's circle back!"

Evasive the hostler's sight, the pair of riders swung into the darkness, returning to the Branding Iron. Tying their ponies to the same hitching rack, they stole alongside the saloon again and eased in the back saloon door.

In only a few minutes a cowboy came running into the front bar of the saloon, telling of the death of Harrington. Hearing this in the back room as they sat together at a card table, Pepper looked at Jed nervously. Jed

winked back.

"What about Tuck Wilds?" Pepper asked low. "He'll be suspicious, as well as the sheriff."

"I came here to get Wilds," Jed answered. "Too, I intend taking Jennie Myers back onto the Little Snake with me."

Wyoming spoke up near them, "I heard a puncher say Jennie and Wilds are getting married tonight."

Jed Wolf cried, "No! Where?"

"That new white church east down the street."

Jed said thoughtfully, "Jennie's staying at J.R.'s hotel; it'd be hard getting her out of there. J.R. has seen me and most of you boys. That Beck has probably alerted him against us, blast him! If I sent several of you boys down there, she could be grabbed and carried off right after she comes onto the street to start to the church."

Pepper Click asked curiously, "What'll you be doing, Jed, you can't get her?"

"Why," Jed looked at the players about, all quiet and listening now, "I'm taking the rest of the boys, the ones you don't, Click, and riding Mr. Tuck Wilds into the street before he gets to that church house. I don't want to have a shot or knife used on this man—I want him to die hard."

Pepper Click shuddered. "That's asking a lot, Jed. Wilds'll fight back."

"You pick the boys to grab Jennie, Pepper," Jed grunted. "Surely you can handle a woman, half a dozen

of you, can't you?" Jed scowled. "I'll take the others—the three of us left are enough to do in Wilds."

Wyoming put in, "Wilds is at the barbershop primping up. I was in the store when Beck's deputy came in and picked up a white shirt and black trousers—"

Jed tapped Pepper on the shoulder. "Get your men going. I want to get Tuck Wilds before he reaches that church."

Pepper Click stood up and began to move about among the riders, selecting his group. Shortly, five men followed him out the back door.

16.

Tuck Wilds could see the lamplit windows of the small frame church some distance down the street now. Suddenly a shot sounded back down the street, near J.R.'s hotel, from which the jurymen and lawmen were to escort Jennie to the wedding. He started. Immediately he growled, "Jed Wolf!"

On the heels of the first shot by the hotel, a fusillade of six-guns roared in the stillness of the night.

Tuck twisted and began running back fast toward the shooting.

From an alley by the church came a shout; still running he glanced back over his shoulder and saw three quicker-than-night horsemen spurring out of the maw of blackness straight after him.

Darting from the middle of the street, he raced for the black shadows under the low porch of an unlighted building on his right.

He was only feet away from shelter when the hooves of the leading horse pounded in his ears; the horse's

breath whistled hoarsely; struck, slammed by the beast's shoulder, he was thrown under the projecting roof, while the horse itself, striking a post, made the overhang shake. Tuck scooted along the boardwalk, tearing his white shirt, raking skin from his side and shoulder.

The horse, temporarily out of control, began bucking; his rider, cursing and spurring, was outlined momentarily by a lighted saloon across and down the street. Though not positive, Tuck thought he recognized Jed Wolf's big figure.

The overhang thudded again as a second galloping pony, close on the first and a bit to one side, slammed his rider into the porch, knocking him off by the edge of the wooden sidewalk. The pony nervous and trembling, stopped quickly under the porch only feet from Tuck.

Even as Tuck rolled onto his belly, twisting his head, his hand slapped down for his gun, fearful he had lost it in his tumble. Relief flooded him as his clawed hand yanked out the cedar-handled Colt.

The trailing horseman meanwhile swung his mount from the porch so disastrous to the first two, wheeling in the street, momentarily occupied.

However, the dismounted second rider by the porch and boardwalk edge, rising onto knees and toes fast, facing Tuck, slid down his right hand for his gun.

Tuck fired. The second rider, still on knees and toes, was tugged to his left. Screaming, he shifted his body back toward Tuck, still able to raise his gun arm.

Tuck's second shot slammed the crouched man, down. The unfired gun loosened, clattering onto the boardwalk. Not yet dead, probably fearing a third slug, the wounded man began to slide, feet first, under the boardwalk. Before the rider made it entirely under cover, however, his boots began to kick in death throes under the dry boards.

Down the street, guns flamed from J.R.'s hotel lobby into the street. The response from the street now seemed lessened. Tuck decided to go there, in case the attacking gang had taken Jennie. The horse of the man under the boardwalk was close. Tuck could use it, he decided.

He stood erect, hurried only a few steps before his right boot thrust through an opening in the boardwalk made by the dying rider kicking a plank loose and aside. Tuck's awkward misstep saved him from being shot.

On his horse in the middle of the street, the trailing rider, silhouetted by the dim light from the saloon, fired a slug which whaled close to Tuck, then crashed noisily into the frame front of the building back of him.

Righting himself, Tuck squeezed a return shot at the silhouette.

The horsemen stood up in his stirrups, a tall figure in the lamplight. Thinking the rider was aiming for a second shot, Tuck fired again. Even as his bullet smacked into the tall rider, the man, leaving his saddle, plummeted earthward. One of his boots caught in a stirrup, and the rider hit on his shoulder blades in the street. Terrified, his

horse bolted, dragging him, stirring a froth of dust down toward the gunfire at J.R.'s hotel. Lances of flame from there now were spaced.

Tuck stepped ahead for the horse of the man whose boots were now deadly quiet under the boardwalk. Nervous, but still under the store porch, the riderless animal edged against the front of the building. Holstering his gun, Tuck reached out, got the bit, and led the skittish animal from under the overhang.

He swung into the saddle and whirled down-street.

Flame seared his left shoulder, slamming him sideways in the saddle. He felt hot slick wetness; and he thought, *My wedding shirt's ruined, torn and bloody.*

From a dark opening between two buildings across the right of way, a horseman nudged his mount, knowing Tuck was hit. Jed's bulk loomed large as the lighted saloon windows outlined him.

As was normal, Tuck had left the Colt chamber under the hammer empty for safety. He now had one shot left to face Jed, who had wounded him already. As Tuck reached for the cedar-handled gun, his arm seemed to move perilously slowly. He knew it was caused by the shock of the shoulder wound.

Jed Wolf called tauntingly, "It's me gitin' you, Wilds!"

Jed's gun flamed.

The broad's shot could have been fatal. But, deliberately delaying Tuck's death, Jed sent his bullet smacking

into the pony under the wounded man.

Tuck's mount jumped once, stumbled, whickered and crashed to the ground on his right side, his head and feet extending, blanking out everything an instant for its rider as it pinned his right leg on the street.

The gun in Tuck's right hand exploded the final shell harmlessly and fell beyond the reach of his extended right arm in the dust. Immobilized on his right side, still horseback on the dead animal that weighted him down, Tuck roused with an effort.

Looking up, he saw big Jed Wolf nudging his own horse closer, outlined by the lamplit windows of the saloon from which, prudently, no one had ventured yet.

Sitting bent forward on his horse, Jed Wolf seemed to be savoring Tuck's helplessness under the dead barrel of the downed animal.

Unseen by Wolf, due to the bulk of the pony's barrel, Tuck's only weapon was the knife sheathed on his left thigh by his useless left arm.

"You've got me, it appears," Tuck said. "Everything's been black once already."

Bending further toward his victim, Jed Wolf seemed unharried as his gun arm extended deliberately.

With one supreme effort Tuck brought his extended right arm from the dusty street, reached for the knife on his left hip and slid it free. He raised his right arm fast—and buried the blade into the breast of the big man bent forward in the saddle taking aim at him.

Jed Wolf's trigger finger convulsed, but too late; his bullet only plowed dust near Tuck. The fired gun thudded on the packed, earthen street.

Then, his head low, Jed Wolf slid from his horse and fell between his shying mount and the dead pony pinning Tuck to the street.

For an instant, Tuck was sure his blade had been true. Then Jed stirred on the earth; very slowly the big 'breed raised his head. Tuck could sense the malice in the other's black eyes.

Rising onto hands and knees, Jed Wolf drew his own knife; Tuck saw its blade glint as Jed clenched it between his teeth. On hands and knees, Jed made a first laborious crawling move forward.

From J.R.'s hotel, the gunfire was quiet. A horse whickered there and started pounding down along the packed, dusty street.

Jed made another crawling move forward. Tuck could see the white teeth holding the steel blade plainly now.

Tuck shook his head and tried to pull his right leg from under the barrel of the dead pony; but he was too weak, too weighted down. He groped with his right hand for a fistful of dust from the street.

He was only half conscious of the rider on the horse pounding closer—a rider who looked odd, like a white ghost with fluttering robes. Tuck realized belatedly the rider was a woman—Jennie, in her wedding gown!

"Jed's down crawling!" he cried warningly.

Jed's next snaking move brought him between the extended fore and hind legs of the dead pony, just across the inert barrel from Tuck. Jed's right hand caught the knife from his teeth. In a moment Jed would have Tuck at his mercy.

Tuck threw the fist full of dust into Jed's eyes then.

Simultaneously, the horsewoman—Jennie—skidded her mount to a stop.

Going back on his haunches, Jed squealed, crying to wash out his eyes; he raised an arm, the knife glinting above it.

Jennie's six-gun roared once, twice. Jed Wolf, still holding his knife, crumpled across the dead barrel of the pony, his knife almost touching the pummeled Tuck. Tuck lay back, motionless, breathing hard, exhausted.

Several horses and running men began sounding close along the packed earth of the street.

Tuck shook his head and tried again to pull himself from under the dead pony; but he was too weak. He lay back, pleased to find he could use his left arm. He could see Jed Wolf's eyes staring, as if the dead man still hated him.

Jennie struck the street nearby, dismounting. Horses drummed nearer; men's boots rang on the wooden sidewalks, smacked in the street behind the racing horses.

Jennie bent over Tuck, her hair touching him, her tears dampening his face. "How bad you hurt, Tuck?" she begged.

A rider slid his horse up almost onto them.

"Thanks, Jennie—not much. Only—get this horse off me."

Dismounting fast beside Jennie, Sheriff Beck leaned over Tuck. "I'll help, Wilds." On the ponies up next were Mr. Shields, the jury foreman, and Smitty, Beck's deputy.

Beck ordered, "Boys, help me pull Tuck from under this dead broomtail."

While Jennie stood aside, Smitty and Shields, stepping close, joined Beck above Tuck; one man caught Tuck's left shoulder. Tuck screamed.

Beck grimaced, and all three men loosened Tuck and straightened up.

"Smitty," Beck said savagely, "rope a hind leg of this dead cayuse!"

While Shields, without saying anything, quietly hauled the body of Jed Wolf aside, Smitty, taking a rope from his saddle, looped an extended hind leg of the dead pony, remounted and dallied the rope on the barn. Other riders began to alight, while the deputy, nudging his bronco, snaked the barrel of the dead pony off Tuck slowly.

Needles of pain in his right leg tortured Tuck immediately. He grimaced, lying there. Jennie knelt to look in his face, her white gown in the dust.

Even men who had run down the street crowded around now. Most of them Tuck remembered from the

jury box. One man cautiously excused from the front door of the lighted saloon across the way.

"I see Jed's men didn't get you, Jennie."

Beck, squatting on his heels, grunted. "Nope. But they tried. Only they were in the open. Five of them are dead; but one got away—Click."

"Pepper. He could cause trouble."

The jury foreman, Shields, said, "Bill got a burn across the hip, sticking it out too far. Nothing serious. The only one we had touched, shooting from inside like we were."

Beck said, "Jennie, when she found they were attacking you here, lit out before we could stop her. Glad even outlaws—if any were still about that late—hesitate to shoot a woman in Colorado."

Jennie, rising, said, "Doc's coming! Let him through."

Beck, sounding satisfied, added, "Tuck, after you getting Jed here and two others, this gang's finished as an outfit."

Dr. Knead, out of breath, coming through the parting crowd, bent over Tuck and ordered briefly: "Get this man in where there's light."

Jennie said, "The store lights are coming on."

"It's close. It'll do," agreed the doctor. "But that shoulder—you'll have to carry him carefully."

The sheriff and near men began to move Tuck along toward the store. Jennie, ahead, held the door open for them to enter. In the store building whose porch had

helped Tuck so, several lamps were now lit. In short order, Tuck was stretched on a counter under a wall lamp, his ruined white shirt removed.

"Give him a drink of whiskey," said the doctor. Moving to the back of the store, he washed his hands with a bit of soap, then came back to give Tuck a shot of morphia in the arm. With forceps and scalpel, Dr. Kincaid set to work.

Jennie, begged, "Doctor—"

The doctor tied off a bleeding vessel. Tuck dropped into unconsciousness. "No bone damaged. But blood loss's bad, Jennie. You'll have to postpone the wedding."

The onlookers exchanged glances. They had been set for a wedding. It seemed strange that only today some of them could have sent Tuck to the penitentiary—or ordered him hung. Now they began to drift.

Sheriff Beck sighed. "I'll explain to the preacher." He left, easing his footfalls on the planking.

Dr. Kincaid said, "Jennie, a few days of your nursing at Mrs. Kelly's hotel—"

"I know," nodded Jennie. But tears stole down her cheeks and dropped onto the white wedding gown.

17.

Click stopped in hiding in the timber above the site of Wilds' Yellow Creek ranch. He really expected the place to be deserted. The house itself was a blackened, burned-out ruin. Click had done that when he used Jed Wolf's dynamite. Yet the other ranch buildings stood.

As Click watched, a trickle of smoke from a cooking fire arose from the ranch-stead area. Startled, dismounting, moving a piece away in the timber to see better, Click observed Indian-garbed figures about the fire—two squaws, several children, one buck, one long-haired white man in cowboy garb—Scotty, Tuck Wilds' friend from Hell Ranch! Click mouthed under his breath,

At first Click did not know why Scotty and his household were on the ranch-stead, unless waiting for Tuck Wilds, like himself. But after the group below ate, Scotty and the buck (Bone, as Click remembered) mounted and, carrying an axe each, rode to the cottonwoods along the creek bank.

The clear reports of the axes biting trees came to Click

up in the timber, and he pretty well knew what the plan of the pair was before he saw them snaking logs with their ropes and horses toward the burned-out cabin site. They intended to re-build or get the logs ready for a new cabin. Wilds' friends obviously planned a cabin raising. Click's hatred deepened.

He watched from the hill till near darkness. There was already a pile of logs for the cabin raising. Scotty himself must be well recovered from his own wound, Click realized, or Scotty would not be swinging such a biting axe, accomplishing so much work. The buck Bone worked well with the white man, and Click knew Scotty had taught him the art of swinging the axe.

As Click rode away toward a hide-out park higher up Yellow Creek, he knew that he would be forced to wait until Scotty's household band was gone before he dared strike at Tuck Wilds, even after Wilds showed up. The bushwhacking must wait. Click knew he must line himself up a food supply to tide him over the delay.

In the early dawn, he waited along a game watering spot along Yellow Creek, among the high pastures; and he was rewarded when a buck came down to the stream to drink, within rifle range. Far enough from the ranch site so that his gunshot could not be heard, Click felt safe hunting. As he sighted on the drinking deer, he knew his food supply question would be answered.

Hit, the buck hunched like a pony, then turned and ran back into the timber. Click remained still. He felt

sure his shot was true. The stricken animal never made over fifty yards before Click heard it crash in the brush, falling.

Quietly Click rolled a cigarette, smoked, then got his horse and rode on the buck's trail. As he reined near the still game and dismounted, he saw his bullet was through the buck's heart. Taking his time, he began cutting up and packing meat. He took it to his camp in the park, pleased.

Somewhat later, he was again hidden in the timber on the hill above Wilds' ranch-stead, watching Scotty's household. The man still cut logs and dragged them in the pile for the cabin raising; the children and squaws were helping by bringing up flat rocks for the chimney. Scotty's idea, Click imagined.

The next day Scotty's oldest boy, on an Indian pony, was sent east. For several minutes Click worried that he had been spotted. Then he remembered that the Reese family lived up White River. The boy was probably being sent there for help in the cabin raising, Scotty knowing the Reese family would like to help Tuck Wilds, a friend of theirs.

At twilight the next day, two riders ahead of a rickety wagon pulled by a draft team came in from the east, crossed Yellow Creek and came toward the ranch site with its pile of logs and rocks.

Click's blood speeded as, still watching, he recognized one of the two riders—Tuck Wilds! Wilds got down from

the saddle easily, helping the rider on the horse with him. Click immediately knew the second rider was Jennie Myers, although again in cowboy garb. Both riders greeted Scotty's family like long-lost friends.

From the wagon tumbled the Reese boy and girls, to stare immediately at Scotty's children and household. Mr. Reese and his wife climbed from their wagon more slowly.

Bitterly, Click faded back into the timber on the hill, mounted, and rode back to his hide-out park in the gathering darkness.

The sight of Tuck Wilds surrounded by friends who would help him rebuild his cabin soured the whole situation for Click. The only pleasure he got from the spying was the cavalier treatment Tuck Wilds offered Jennie Myers; and he sensed that the wound that must have postponed the couple's wedding the night of the fighting in Grand City had kept them single. They appeared almost distant with each other.

As Click rolled in his blanket that night, he vowed that Tuck Wilds' wedding would never take place before his killing; for Click knew, the cabin raising over, the couple would be left alone by their friends.

Next day, again hidden, Click watched the cabin raising. With two big logs laid parallel for foundations, the timbers were rolled up inclined poles to the top of the wall. The cabin rose a pair of logs at a time, two on the sides, two on the ends. Notches locked the logs in place

on the corners and reduced the space between them. Some seven-foot high, smaller logs were laid the short way across the cabin as joists for the loft flooring. When Click saw Tuck Wilds working with the other men on the shorter logs of the gables, beveling the ends of them to the roof angle, he realized Wilds was literally recovered from his wounding in Grand City.

Nothing now would give Click greater pleasure than removing Wilds from his excellent state of health—to death.

Another day, and only three men were working on the roof, Click realized Bone was missing. He worried about the Indian till afternoon, when Bone came in with an elk he had killed for meat for the cabin raisers. The fireplace, with the women and children building it of stones bedded in mud, was nearly up now; the roof was being covered with earth and sod.

Click envied the happy, gay group gathering for supper. A bottle flashed, but Click knew the liquor was only an appetizer, with Bone there. He stole away from his spying, his mouth bitter with gall. That night in camp he cleaned his rifle and six-gun. He thought that another darkness would see Tuck Wilds a lone quarry, or at best, with only Jennie with him.

Click went to sleep almost happy at the thought of the killing ahead.

A door and two windows were cut. Next, sliding shutters were put inside the widow openings, but Click,

watching, knew they would be left open in good weather. The cabin door was swung, a bar installed with a latch-string. Chunking billets were rived from timbers and put lengthwise in the opening between the log walls, the children mudding the scarce cracks they seemed to find.

Hungrily, Click watched the noon feast the women of the ranch site readied for the cabin raisers. The shouts came faintly up to him as the two families of children began playing after dinner. Then preparations were made rapidly for the departure of the two families. The Reese team was hitched to the rickety wagon; the horses of Scotty's household were caught up and saddled.

Into their wagon crowded the Reese family; the team was driven across Yellow Creek, all the Reese family waving as they swung eastward. Scotty's household, all on horseback, trekked away as quickly, headed for Hell Ranch, west across the desert.

Click was pleased Bone, the buck, rode along with Scotty's family. The Indian was undoubtedly the most adept sign reader in the assemblage; and if he had seen where Click killed the buck, or Click's trail, Click felt surt the Indian would have remained behind.

Jennie and Tuck, left alone, seemed suddenly intent on chores, each avoiding the other the rest of the afternoon. While Tuck made a puncheon bench and table and carried them inside along with a block chair, Jennie worked on what appeared a mattress, then curtains. Click wondered what had caused the estrangement.

With dusk near, the two entered the cabin and, from the slight rising smoke from the chimney, must have eaten lightly, had coffee, using the new table and seats. Then Tuck carried the mattress into the cabin, returning to take his blanket roll and turn toward the barn. This was not something Click had anticipated. Then he realized the two feared nearness, being alone; that they would ride poste-haste early in the morning for a preacher.

He promised himself neither would get far on the trail. He had hoped to steal to the window if they were together, fire through it and kill both. Now, with Tuck outside, sleeping in the barn, Click did not feel it would be safe to steal up to a window and kill just Jennie. It would undoubtedly turn Tuck into a lobo wolf who would trail and try to kill Click.

Click squatted in the timber edge above the ranch, rolled a cigarette and lit it, thinking.

How easy it would have been to fire from the darkness into the lamp-lit cabin! He could, Click knew, have killed Tuck, the girl, and never have been endangered! Click gr�aced at his bad luck. If he attempted to kill the two, separated as they were, he might only give his presence away.

Click watched the light extinguished in the cabin and reached a decision. After a night so near, and yet apart, these two would not delay their wedding. They would trail east early tomorrow.

Rising, Click crushed out his cigarette with a boot

sole and walked back to his horse. Stepping into the saddle, he rode away through the scratching branches, headed for a spot he remembered on the trail just east of Yellow Creek.

Below the hill Click selected for the bushwhacking, there was a scrub oak stand. In this scrub, Click dismounted and rolled up in his blanket, his pony near. While it was still dark, however, he awoke, rose, checked his guns, muzzled his mount, and began to climb the dark hill rising ahead and above him afoot, rifle in hand.

A piece from where he came atop the hill the trail passed over it, in an area bare for over a hundred yards except for two big rocks directly on the brow of the hill. Careful to make no tracks visible from the trail, Click swung back of the two big rocks and then between them, squatting.

Below him, his horse was unseen and unheard. In timber toward Yellow Creek, a coyote yapped. Click shivered for the first time, waiting. Gray light stole from the east. Birds, rousing, began to mount aloft, their chatter the only noise.

The light grew stronger; actual sunlight struck the rocks on either side of him, yet did not warm him. Fleecy, rose-tinged clouds moved overhead; the sky behind them was a deep blue. A light breeze stirred, making a tiny dust-devil whirl on the bare top of the hill the trail crossed.

It was a good ambush spot, Click felt, if he got his

shots in right, and fast, when the two showed; then he would again be alone, the killing over, and he could leave the area, even with the world.

Two dots—mounted riders—showed on the trail below from Yellow Creek. Chambering a shell in the Winchester, Click found himself chuckling. Yes, this was a glorious day—for killing.

18.

Tuck Wilds had already shaved and washed in the early dawn when Jennie came from the doorway of the cabin and called, "Breakfast's ready!"

Tuck went toward the cabin quickly.

Jennie eyed him as he neared. "You shaved?" She smiled. "We ride back to the preacher today?"

"Unless you've changed your mind."

Seating themselves across from each other at the puncheon table, they were smiling at each other as if at a shared joke. It was after finishing his coffee that the thing he had seen last night in the dusk erased Tuck's good humor.

"Someone in the timber edge on the hill was looking down here last evening. He struck a match."

"Then Bone was right." Jennie's voice held no emotion.

"Bone said he thought someone had killed a buck up Yellow Creek real recently. The same horse tracks showed close to us."

"Who would it be?"

"Click."

"He used dynamite before."

"If he'd had any left, he'd have tried using it, maybe last night, had he had a chance."

"He's looking to bushwhack you, then, Tuck?"

Tuck grimaced. "He knows you're with me. If he planned to kill me, he'd kill you, too."

Jennie finished her coffee quietly and stood up. "We'll ride back, armed. I'll carry my white gown rolled behind the saddle."

"That's wise." Tuck rose. "I'll saddle our horses."

"Those black trousers and white shirt replacements I got you—bring them."

"Of course."

Quickly Tuck had the horses geared, a rifle in each saddle sheath. He was hardly done when Jennie, carrying saddle bags and a roll he knew was her wedding outfit, walked down to the corral. She was wearing cowboy attire, a gunbelt at her waist, a big hat.

"Do I get a kiss for helping you mount?" Tuck asked boldly.

"Only one." She reddened, but held him to the single count.

Lightheartedly, the two headed the ponies down into Yellow Creek. As they splashed out on the east bank, Tuck said seriously, "Click's no fool. If he doesn't already suspect we'll trail east to get married, he'll soon

know it, ride to get ahead, and then try bushwhacking."

"We'll be watchful," said Jennie, no worry in her voice.

Tuck glanced at her, surprised at her lack of concern.

They were riding in a glorious moaning, under a bright blue sky across which a few clouds moved. The ponies were carrying them in the tireless fox trot of the bronco, hooves clopping softly on the trail.

When the two riders started up a half-mile hill slope, the top bare above, except for two twin rocks, they let the ponies drop into a walk. It was then Tuck thought he glimpsed movement in the scrub oak stand at the foot of the hill, some half-mile away. He said nothing, but kept darting glances that way as the ponies climbed, yet saw nothing further even though he could look down on the stand.

As the ponies crested the bare top of the hill, down on its dark side, toward the scrub oaks, a rifle flashed.

"Down!" Tuck cried, dismounting fast, sliding out his Winchester, levering it, and pulling his horse to cover the girl as well as himself.

Jennie and he stood between the two horses, holding them for a bulwark.

"We weren't shot at," Tuck said.

"No," said Jennie, levering her rifle. "It was Bone warning us. After he found someone snooping back on the ranch, the squaws told me Scotty meant to send him back to keep an eye on us."

"The rocks ahead. Bone fired at someone there."

As he looked, a rifle flamed from the rocks. Down on the hillside an Indian—Bone—leaped erect, dropping his rifle, fell awkwardly and rolled downward—evidently hit, out of the fight. The ambusher had removed danger from the slope below.

"Hold these horses, Jennie; back up!" Tuck dashed across the bare earth for the hillside.

Just as he threw himself into a clump of scrub oak below the edge of the hilltop, a rifle bullet, coming from the twin big rocks, cut branches over his head.

Nevertheless, Tuck began crawling forward through the little trees.

Instead of backing the horses, Jennie, her rifle over a pony's back, squeezed the trigger. Tuck wanted to yell to her to get back. Click would know the girl's legs were unprotected, and might try to shoot them out from under her. Instead, he continued snaking forward, keeping to what cover he could just under the edge of the hilltop.

Jennie fired again. Tuck realized then she did not expect to hit Click with a straight shot, but hoped ricochetting bullets would drive them to where Tuck could see him. Tuck found several yards of prairie ahead, bare earth, beyond which were more straggling little trees. He sprang up and dashed forward.

Something—a bullet!—whipped his pants leg. He slipped into the scrub oak cover, glad for once Click was shooting low. Then he snaked a few yards; again

there was bare earth before him, yards and yards of it.

He could see the twin rocks clearly now, but not Click.

Jennie shot again.

Tuck heard Click curse, not as if hit, but as if exasperated. Tuck thought, He'll try to shoot Jennie's legs now.

He called, "I'm coming for you, bushwhacker!"

But he only lay there, peering through the edge of the tangling little oaks, his rifle extended, hoping Click would show. Click did not.

Jennie's next shot sang between the rocks.

As if fearful of a shot glancing into him from Jennie's rifle, Click scrambled, sliding his Winchester over a base of the near rock a few feet high.

As Click's eyes showed to sight, Tuck fired.

Click disappeared.

Tuck went bounding forward over the bare hill toward the rocks.

No shot came. Tuck leaped over the rock base. He saw Click was dead, now with three eyes. He turned from the bushwhacker and yelled to Jennie, "It's over."

Jennie hurried up, leading the two ponies.

Tuck would always think that, instead of obeying him and backing the ponies, she was nudging them forward. As she saw Click and before Tuck could berate her, she asked, "Isn't Bone moving?"

Tuck stepped onto his bronco; Jennie mounted hers;

and the two prodded the animals down onto the steep slope.

Bone, hearing and seeing them, sat up on the hill-side.

The two slid their ponies back on their haunches as they neared Bone, and Tuck asked, "How bad you hurt?"

Bone pointed at Tuck's pants leg. "He shoot you low?"

"A clean miss," Tuck said truthfully. "But you're bleeding."

"He just knock leg down. Lose my rifle way off," Bone admitted.

"You can tell Scotty you saved our lives," Tuck said, dismounting, "after seeing the doc—"

Jennie tore up a faded old shirt from her saddle bag and bent to wrap Bone's flesh wound. Tuck remembered he had a bit of medicinal whiskey in his gear. He got it. Bone took the bottle eagerly.

"No need doctor. Got drink." Bone nodded, satisfied. "I'll ride back, tell Scotty."

"Then tell him we're riding on to get married," Tuck said.

Jennie, Bone's wound bandaged, stood up. The breeze and exertion had warmed her, and she took off her big hat and wiped her face with a sleeve.

"Good squaw," commented Bone. "Shoot rifle like a man."

"Six-gun, too," Tuck added dryly.

"Never get another squaw like her." Bone then seemed to recall something. "Killer's horse by mine." He nodded down at the scrub oak stand.

"Yours," Tuck said.

"I'll get your horses," said Jennie. She stepped into her saddle and spurred on down the hillside, into the scrub oaks, where the two horses in question were hidden.

"Make her squaw quick," advised Bone, standing up with Tuck's help as Jennie rode uphill, leading two horses.

Tuck helped Bone mount his pony. "*Gracias.*"

"Thank you—and Scotty for us," added Jennie.

Bone started down the hill, his riding, at least, not hindered by his bandaged leg, leading a second horse.

"Bone says make you squaw quick," Tuck told Jennie, mounting, nudging his horse beside hers.

"For a day or two there—I thought you wanted out," Jennie said soberly.

"Only because I'll never be worthy of you," Tuck stated humbly. "You may be a better shot than me."

Jennie laughed, softening.

When Tuck reached for her, she was clinging, feminine, her lips warm. As their horses pulled them apart, they laughed together understandingly and spurred uphill for the trail.

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YELLOW CREEK GUN

by

LYMAN LUTES

Author of "Red River Maverick"
and "Horse Thief Trail"



Although he had been living on a homestead on Yellow Creek for seven years, Tuck Wilds had been hesitant about filing a claim until now. On his way to the county seat finally to do that, he was held up by the knifing of a woman, the pursuit of her attacker, the latter's capture and his trial. And by the time he was ready to take possession of his land, he found he had missed out by a matter of hours.

Because of some old Wanted posters, Tuck wasn't certain he wanted to fight the loss of his land. But a girl, strong and courageous, insisted that he battle for his rights—with her help.

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DEADWOOD

by

TOM MARTIN



Four men rode out of Longmont, Colorado, on the trail of two horse thieves. Three days later, they captured the outlaws in the log barn of an upland cowman named Bolton. The four men then took their two captives down to Deadwood Canyon, selected an oak with a big horizontal limb thirty feet from the ground, and hanged the outlaws.

But that was just the beginning. Bolton, his beautiful niece, and most of the county were unwilling to believe the hanged men guilty and resolved to avenge them, using whatever weapons they had, including a vicious dog which did not bark. Within two days one of the four had been shot down, another savagely attacked, and the uplands were alive with manhunters who rode day and night on the retribution trail for what they believed to be murder.

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RECENT ARCADIA WESTERNS

RETURN OF A FAST GUN — by Jeff Blaine

Released after eight years in the infamous Yuma jail, Tully Wilson, fast gun, returned to Hermansville. His dream was a simple one. He wished to marry Belle Wake and to lead a peaceful life. But a bushwhacker's bullet intervened. Smoldering anger blazed into new fire, and Tully found himself on the vengeance trail.

The only man who could help Tully was Casey Gregg, an old hermit whose brains were befuddled by alcohol. But the bushwhacker's bullet spoke again, and Gregg's tongue too was stilled.

Thereafter, Tully entered a whirl of adventure. And a climax was reached when the two fastest guns in the old Southwest met and settled the score with hot lead.

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AMBUSH CANYON — by Will Bradford

United States Marshal Bob Fulton was an officer who made a practice of letting trouble come to him before he moved to quash it. But in the case of Big Jim Morton's scheme to involve the other local cattlemen in an all-out range war with Travia Quayle's tough Texans, Fulton waited almost too long.

Raiders struck Quayle's camp, stampeded his herd and shot down three of his men. Suddenly Marshal Fulton found himself squarely between two trigger-itchy factions of cowmen who were sworn to destroy one another. And when the gunsmoke cleared, Fulton had learned a bitter lesson: Never wait for trouble if you want to avoid it.

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ARIZONA DRIFTER — by John Durham

Unknowingly, Arch Forrester made a nearly fatal mistake when he rode into Tucson, Arizona. For popular Frank Buell had just been shot by an unknown killer, and it was the unsuspecting Arch who suddenly found that he had been selected to put his neck in a lynch rope.

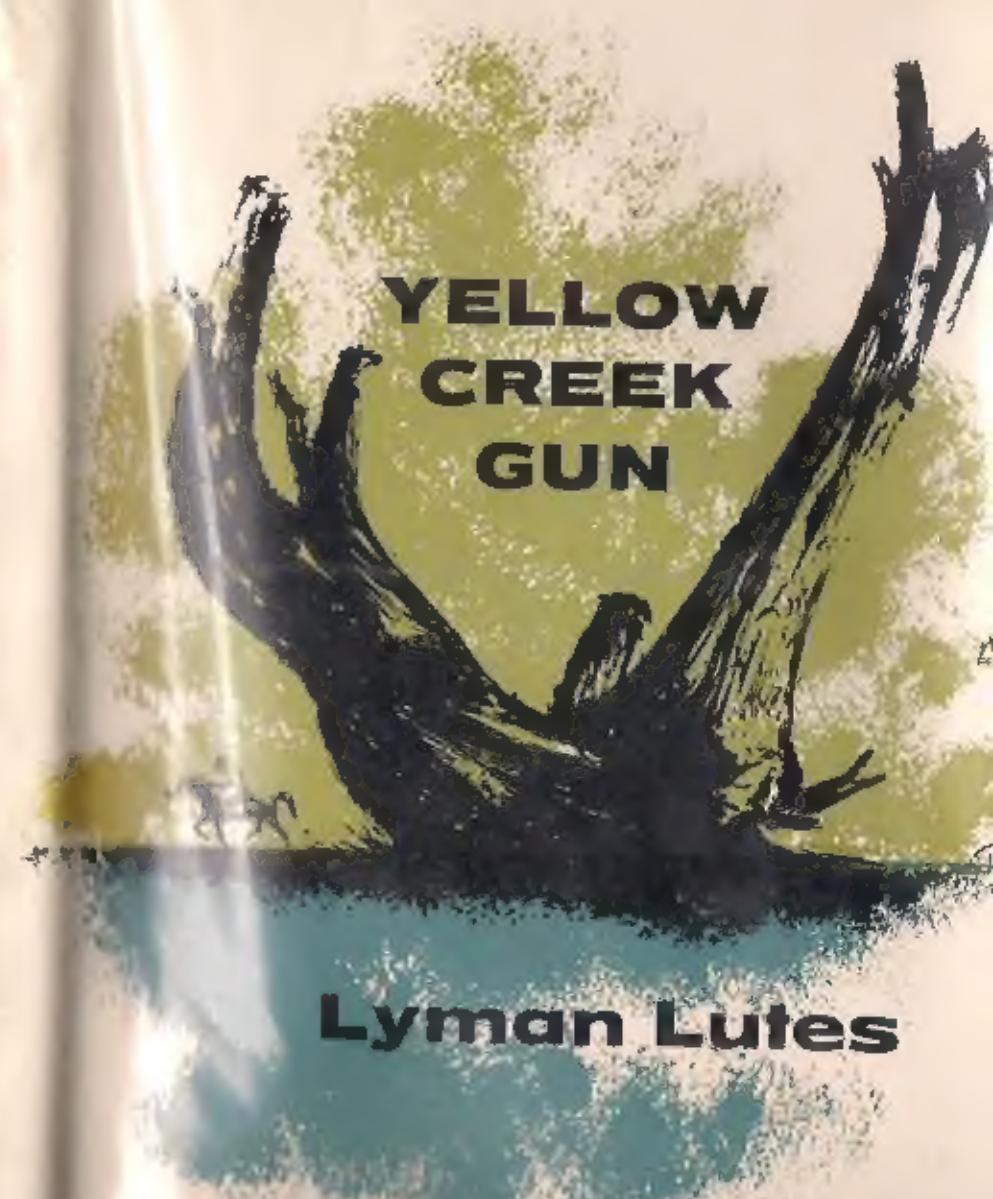
Arch managed to escape and found a powerful ally in old Ames King whom, in his own bizarre and unorthodox way, he saved the life of the old man's dying grandson. But there were many who wanted Arch dead, and even King's help was powerless to stave off their vengeance.

A hunted man, Arch was forced to take a lonely trail, strewn with bloodshed and violence, before he sought his way to justice.

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YELLOW CREEK GUN Lutes



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